

Scotpress

ENTERPRISE

LOG
ENTRIES
83



a
STAR TREK
fanzine

CONTENTS

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|------|
| Mistakes Sometimes Happen | by Rosemarie Heaton | P 3 |
| Revenge for Babel | by Jean Sloan | P 13 |
| Contentment | by Sheryl Peterson | P 24 |
| It Had to Happen to Me This Time | | |
| - Didn't It? | by Joyce Devlin | P 25 |
| A Nice Try | by Maria Swann | P 31 |
| Starafel | by Alinda Alain | P 35 |
| Lost in Orbit | by Sheryl Peterson | P 51 |
| Interlude | by Krysia Baczala | P 52 |
| Never Again | by Sheryl Peterson | P 58 |
| Serendipity | by Denise Watkins | P 59 |
| Sandy | by Sheryl Peterson | P 62 |
| If Tomorrow Would be Really Yesterday | | |
| | by Manuela Reitano | P 63 |
| Achilles Heel | by Teresa Abbott | P 71 |
| Problem | by Pac Deacon | P 82 |
| When Friendship Waits | by Marcia Pecor | P 83 |

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello. and welcome to Enterprise - Log Entries 83

Well, it looks as though people like to read LOCs, but not to write them! If anyone would like to comment on the stories in ScoTpress or IDIC zines, we will use the letters, but in the meantime, one of the Library Association magazines recently carried this parody of 'The Listeners' as an appeal for contributions. I have adapted it further...

"Is there anything there?" asked the Editor
As she scanned the letters there.
But no comments awaited her reading
For the LOC in-tray was bare.
Then a telephone rang in the hallway;
Joy filled the Editor's head
As she listened in anticipation -
"You want to say something?" she said.
But no-one answered the Editor,
No voice from the end of the line
Promised a LOC for the next Log Entries,
And her hope it did swiftly decline.
So were they just phantoms, those readers,
Who dwelt in the land of Star Trek,
Who read, and were quiet, and did nothing
To help save this Editor's neck?
Were they all much to busy to write her,
Or did they feel nothing at all
When they read in last issue's Log Entries
The plea of the Editor's call?
And she felt in her heart their reluctance,
Their silence answering her cry,
For the fanzine had to be published,
But all her ideas had run dry.
It was hard to arrest their attention,
And the effort was hurting her head:-
"Tell them I asked, and nobody answered,
That I tried my best," she said.
Never the least stir made the readers,
Though every word she wrote
Was inscribed on the editorial pages.
Please - won't somebody give her hope?
Aye, they saw her plea on the pages
For comments of interest and news;
Will silence surge softly backward -
Or will YOU air your views?

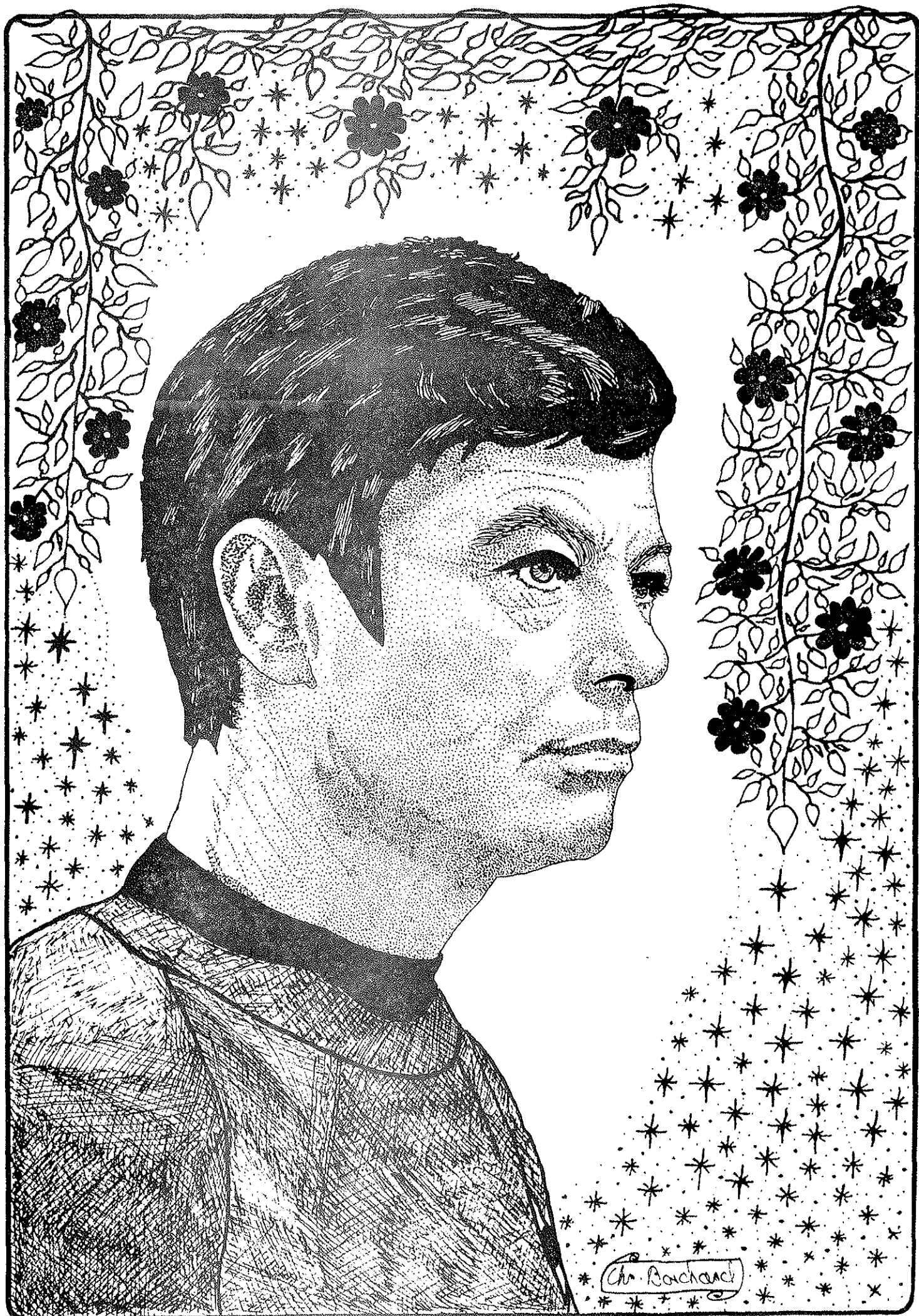
Valerie

We welcome submissions of fiction, poetry and artwork for ScoTpress zines; either series-based for Log Entries, or 'Next Generation'- based for Make It So. We are looking for action-adventure stories, preferably with some character inter-relationship. Alternate universe stories are acceptable, but even these should not be movie-based, K/S, or involve the death of main characters, or be primarily about other ships. These are, after all, "The voyages of the Starship Enterprise..."

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MISTAKES SOMETIMES HAPPEN

by

Rosemarie Heaton

"Doctor, have you nothing better to do than wander around the bridge complaining?" If Kirk's voice sounded a trifle weary it was only to be expected; McCoy had been sounding off about inexperienced landing parties for hours.

"If," Kirk continued, "we don't allow inexperienced crewmembers on survey parties, how do they become experienced? You have a better idea, Doctor? I for one would be very interested to hear it."

McCoy stopped pacing. "You know I don't have a better idea, Jim. It's just that I don't like the ratio."

"Ratio?" Kirk enquired.

"Experience versus inexperience. I think we should send down more experienced crew."

"Oh, really?" Kirk's answer was little more than a murmur.

McCoy continued, "One to one would be best, or two to one. Any higher than that and those with experience have to spend most of their time babysitting rather than getting on with their own work."

Uhura and Chekov exchanged glances. Kirk's expression was getting stonier by the second. McCoy seemed oblivious of the imminent explosion as he blithely carried on.

"Doctor McCoy," Kirk began quietly enough, "the day I come and tell you how to treat a patient, then you may tell me how to run my ship. Until then, may I suggest that you keep your expertise in fields other than your own to yourself."

McCoy grinned, moved closer, and whispered, "Oh, come on, Jim. I know you didn't pick the landing party - Spock did. No need to defend him, he's quite capable of doing that himself."

"You seem to forget who has the final say in these matters." Kirk kept his voice down; the bridge wasn't an ideal place to discuss command decisions, after all.

Unfortunately McCoy didn't seem to have any such qualms as he continued, "But you weren't convinced, and you let him over-rule you."

"I was not over-ruled! I listened to his advice and agreed with him."

"And in this case, the advice was wrong."

"Are you accusing my First Officer and me of incompetence, Doctor?"

"No, of course not. Just that like the rest of us mortals he makes mistakes."

"I don't remember Spock ever saying he couldn't make mistakes."

"Well, he manages to give the impression it's impossible."

"What makes you think his advice was wrong, anyway?"

"Putting Tomlinson and Morris together, for a start."

"Why?" Kirk was interested in hearing McCoy's answer, for this had been the one query he'd made.

"Have you seen them together?"

Kirk nodded - who hadn't?

McCoy continued, "They're so infatuated with each other they'd never notice what's going on around them."

"Precisely why Spock wanted them together, Bones."

"Huh, he's probably never even noticed their canoodling, and he'll be so involved in some crack-pot scheme down there that he'll let them wander into some danger or other."

Their voices had risen slightly during the exchange; the bridge crew were frankly staring at McCoy.

"He'll let them wander into some danger or another," Kirk repeated. "He's not meant to be down there to look after a couple of love-lorn brats, Bones. They're meant to be down there to look after *him*."

"Oh, old Spock can look after himself, surely. He's been on enough landing parties."

Silence followed McCoy's last remark. Kirk looked at him suspiciously; just what was McCoy up to? Nothing good, he suspected.

"Doctor, why don't you go down to sickbay and make sure that everything is ready for the casualties that you seem to be expecting."

"I was only trying..." McCoy shut up as Kirk glared at him, and left more hurriedly than usual.

Kirk turned to Uhura. "Lieutenant, contact Mr. Spock for me, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

As she attempted to make contact Kirk mused on why he allowed McCoy's blustering to irritate him at times like these. Then,

"Captain, I'm not receiving an answer."

All Kirk's former misgivings flowed back. He knew he shouldn't have listened to Spock; what did Spock know about couples in love? As he thought, he acted.

"Chekov, wide area scan, please. Uhura will give you Spock's last known location. Uhura, what about the other two groups? See if you can contact them."

A few minutes later Uhura reported success with Lt. Marshall's group, but she still couldn't raise Spock or Sulu.

"Damn!" Kirk muttered to himself, then, "Tell Marshall to head for the rendezvous point. Instruct Giotto to meet me in the transporter room with a fully armed search party. Mr. Scott, you have the con."

Uhura's acknowledgement was met by closed lift doors.

Kirk thought he'd moved fast, but Giotto and his men were already waiting for him.

"Anything from the surface, Mr. Kyle?"

"Not so far, sir. Mr. Marshall has the beam down point in view, but can see no sign of the others."

"Right, Giotto, I want you and your team down there immediately. Report back as soon as you materialise."

The next few seconds seemed like hours to Kirk. He caught Kyle's eye as he paced. "Sorry. Irritating habit, isn't it?" he apologised without stopping.

Kyle murmured something that was interrupted by Giotto's call from the surface.

"I've made contact with Mr. Marshall, sir, but a quick scan of the area shows no-one else. Mr. Sulu was to investigate the cave system, while Mr. Spock took vegetation samples nearby. Mr. Marshall's going there while I have a look at the caves."

"Very well. Keep in contact with each other, and us."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk turned away from the intercom as McCoy erupted into the transporter room.

"See? What did I say?"

Kirk ignored him and spoke to the bridge. "Route all calls from the planet's surface to my office, Lieutenant." Nodding to Kyle he left the transporter room with McCoy trailing after him.

Neither said anything until they reached Kirk's office. Kirk gestured McCoy to a chair and sat down himself.

"Why're we here, Jim? I should be down there. You don't know what might have happened."

"No, I don't, but Giotto's quite capable of informing me and you. However, before either of us goes down there I want to say a few words to you about your attitude to Spock."

McCoy was amazed. "What? This is hardly the time for..."

"McCoy, just listen. We can't do anything until they locate

the landing parties, so I just want to say that I have no wish to hear you run Spock down in front of crewmembers again. From what I can gather half the trouble on Taurus II stemmed from your attitude to him. If you constantly haze him, how the hell do you expect the rest of the crew to give him the respect he deserves as their senior officer? If you feel the need to remonstrate over command decisions, then do it to his face and without an audience of junior crewmembers."

McCoy looked as though he wanted to interrupt, and Kirk lifted a weary hand. "I know he's a big boy and can look after himself, and I am also aware that he has the complete loyalty of the bridge crew, but new crew who hear you would be justified in thinking that he's incompetent, and therefore dangerous to be with. And both you and I are well aware how far that is from the truth."

McCoy shifted in his seat. "I never had any intention of running him down, Jim. You know that, and so does he."

"It doesn't matter what he and I know, it's what gets into the rumour mill on this ship that I'm worried about. I'm not asking you to stop your mock fights, just to be more circumspect in your tirades in front of witnesses. By that I mean no more episodes like the one on the bridge earlier this morning."

"I still maintain that the survey party was badly selected. And I'm right, or we wouldn't be searching for them now."

To Kirk's relief his intercom signalled an incoming call.

"Giotto here, sir. I've made contact with Mr. Spock. There's been an accident. Could we have a med team beamed down?"

McCoy was halfway out of the door before he'd finished.

Kirk said, "Dr. McCoy's on his way. What happened, and where's Spock?"

"I'm not sure exactly what happened, sir, but Mr. Sulu and his party seem to have had some kind of accident, and Mr. Spock went after them."

"Well, where are Tomlinson and Morris, then? Never mind, Giotto, I'm coming down. I presume Commander Spock has a good explanation for me."

Giotto flinched slightly at Kirk's tone and shrugged his shoulders, thinking that at least Spock could stand up for himself. He got plenty of practice, after all.

The medical team was arriving as he turned to re-enter the caves, and he indicated that they should follow him. McCoy was all business; he'd get to Spock later.

"How far in are they, Giotto?"

"Not too far, about 100 metres, but they're fairly deep."

The Doctor looked puzzled. "What'd he do, fall down a well?"

"Something of the kind, Doctor," Spock's deep voice answered him. "Did you get the climbing equipment, Commander? I expect you brought experienced cavers, Doctor?"

Giotto nodded while McCoy shrugged.

"You asked for a medical team, not a caving party."

"As the accident occurred within a cave system I mistakenly assumed that you would not need the obvious stated, Dr. McCoy."

McCoy glanced at him, but was saved the trouble of replying by Kirk's impatient voice.

"Why are you two standing here arguing while I've an injured man needing attention?"

Spock was composed as he turned to face the irate Captain. "Until the ropes are fixed there is nothing else to do but wait, Captain. I have assured myself that the Lieutenant's injuries are not severe. His companions seem to have escaped injury."

"You can let me be the judge of that, Spock," McCoy grunted. He was about to continue when Kirk caught his eye, and they were interrupted by Tomlinson's breathless arrival.

"Mr. Spock, sir... Oh sorry, Captain - I didn't see you. That's the ropes ready, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Tomlinson. We can proceed now, Captain."

Spock moved back into the darkness; Kirk and McCoy followed. As Spock moved more quickly, Kirk and McCoy soon found themselves floundering.

"Spock, damn you!" McCoy yelled. "Where's the goddammed lights around here?"

Spock came back, looked at them both, raised a eyebrow, gave Kirk a light, and turned away, followed by McCoy's mutters about not everybody having cats for ancestors. They moved more swiftly now that they were confident of their footing, and soon reached the gaping hole.

"Doctor, how do you wish to approach the problem? The hole is some fifty metres deep; there is little room for manoeuvre."

"Can't you just transport them out?"

"Mr. Scott and I both agree that the properties of the surrounding rocks do not make that a valid proposition, Doctor."

"Hmm, I'll just need to go down, then. You're sure about Johnstone and Carver?"

"They admit to no serious injuries. They must be bruised, but seem otherwise whole."

"Right, let's get them up then. Porter can check them out."

Grumbling, McCoy waited until Spock and Morris had got the two ensigns back to the surface, and then followed Spock back down. Grudgingly he admitted that Spock had been right; Sulu's injuries were not serious, but the bruising was considerable. He looked as though he had been at the bottom of the pile.

"Are you sure about the transporter, Spock?"

"Yes, but I can get the Captain to contact Mr. Scott again, if you wish."

"No, I'll trust your judgement."

"Thank you, Doctor." Spock's tone was non-committal, and McCoy glanced at him, but couldn't see clearly enough to make out his expression, if any.

Sulu was placed in the makeshift bosun's chair to be hauled to the top. Spock climbed alongside him in an attempt to soften the inevitable contact with the rock walls. At one point Sulu thought he heard the Vulcan grunt softly, but put it down to the strenuous nature of the climb.

After what seemed to be an interminable climb they reached the top. Willing hands lifted Sulu onto the waiting stretcher.

Kirk said, "Back to the ship immediately, please." He began to follow the stretcher when Spock said,

"We still have the ship's doctor to retrieve, Captain."

Kirk turned back, grinned in the gloom. "So we have. I doubt he'd be pleased about spending the night down there. Giotto, Tomlinson, give us a hand here, will you?"

Spock's eyebrows registered his reception of Kirk's sally. Giotto began sending the chair back down. Spock called to McCoy; they all listened intently, but couldn't hear an answer. Shrugging slightly, and before anyone else could move, Spock had started back down.

Moments later a tug on the ropes alerted the men at the top of the well shaft that McCoy was ready to return. Kirk could see his light swinging backwards and forwards as they lifted him.

"What's the matter, Bones? Afraid of the dark?" he quipped.

"Mr. Spock thinks he was bitten by something on his way up with Sulu. I was just trying to see what it might have been," McCoy answered absently.

As Spock joined them Kirk looked at him, but the light prevented close scrutiny. While Giotto and Tomlinson retrieved the ropes, the other three made their way out of the caves.

Kirk was speaking softly to Spock. "I want a good explanation of this from you before long. I'm beginning to believe you shouldn't be allowed out by yourself."

Spock seemed to bring himself back from somewhere else. "Of course, sir. As soon as I can ascertain for myself exactly what happened, you will be informed."

McCoy prevented further conversation. "Lemme see, Spock."

"It is not painful, Doctor. Surely you would be better employed checking up on Mr. Sulu?"

"Who's the Doctor around here, anyway? Is there any insect life on this planet that we know to be dangerous?"

Spock shook his head in answer. To tell the truth, although the bite was not sore his arm was beginning to stiffen, and he was starting to feel nauseous.

McCoy peered at him. "Blast!" he muttered as he tried vainly to stop the Vulcan keeling over. "Jim, transport us up now. Why can't he stay put of trouble? I'm never too sure who's worse, you or him..." The Doctor's carping faded as they dematerialised.

Kirk was off the platform first and heading for the intercom as McCoy bent over the comatose Vulcan, talking at the same time.

"Did any of you see anything down there that might have caused this?"

Giotto answered first. "There was a lot of scrabbling when we were waiting at the well's edge, but I didn't see anything."

Tomlinson was still thinking. "I think Ensign Johnstone had caught a couple of specimens, sir, just before they entered the cave system. Maybe he still has them."

"Well, go and find him. I want anything he has down to the medical labs, fast." McCoy turned to Kirk. "Where's that stretcher team?"

"On their way. They can't move any quicker. How is he?"

"Alive. I'll get blood and tissue samples to the labs immediately. Pray Johnstone's still got his specimens, and that's what bit him, otherwise it's going to be guesswork pure and simple. Time could be against us there. It's a very quick-working poison. Ah, good. Took your time, didn't you?"

The two orderlies paid no attention to him; they both knew McCoy's bark was worse than his bite. Lifting Spock gently they transferred him to the stretcher and moved off quickly, Kirk and McCoy following them, McCoy still muttering about the carelessness of some people.

Eventually Kirk's temper snapped. "McCoy, do you never listen?" Catching the Doctor's bemused eye, "Oh, what's the use?" he snarled. "I'll be on the bridge. Keep me informed!"

Sulu was sitting up when the small procession reached sickbay. "What happened?"

"Got bitten when he was helping you up. Did you notice anything?"

"No." Sulu shook his head. "I wasn't paying much attention. I heard him grunt at one point, though. Is it bad?"

"Not good." McCoy's reply was terse and over his shoulder as he went through to Intensive Care. Several minutes later he was back to meet Sulu's enquiring look.

"Sulu, Tomlinson thought Johnstone had collected some specimens. Is that so?"

"Yes, just before we entered the cave. They were not unlike a large scorpion."

"Did he still have them when we hauled you out?"

"I assume so. I wish I hadn't been so careless, Doctor. I feel as though this is all my fault."

"Well, we can apportion blame later. Still, you might as well tell me what happened while I'm waiting for the lab results."

Sulu's tale was short. He, Johnstone and Carver had entered the caves with instructions not to venture more than fifty metres without proper equipment. Carver had noticed an inscription incised into the rock, and in their excitement they had forgotten their orders and penetrated further. Sulu had tripped and fallen, dislodging the well cover. The others had been too close, and had fallen with him. He had been knocked unconscious for a while, and didn't remember much until he heard Carver answering Spock's queries. After that McCoy knew as much as he did.

"Well, I hope you'll let this be a lesson to you. Spock's always got good reasons for any order he's likely to give you." McCoy regarded the young Oriental severely. To himself he thought that Sulu was likely to be his own worst critic - once Kirk had finished with him, at any rate.

Going back into Spock's room he thought back to Kirk's outburst in the corridor. It looked as though he was going to have some explaining to do himself. Sighing, he checked the life support equipment and mulled over his relationship with the ship's First Officer. He supposed he was a bit short with him at times, but Spock tried the patience of the most patient of men - and McCoy was willing to admit that patience was not one of his virtues.

The shrilling of the intercom roused him from his reverie. Grimacing, he answered, expecting it to be Kirk demanding results. Much to his surprise it was the lab, reporting that they had isolated the poison and were presently manufacturing an antidote.

"That was quick," McCoy enthused. "Good work. Get it up here as soon as possible, will you?" Disconnecting from the lab he called the bridge. Kirk still sounded pissed, McCoy thought, but the news soon restored the Captain's good temper.

"I'll be down shortly, Bones. How's Sulu?" remembering belatedly the other casualty.

"Sulu's fine, except for a guilty conscience."

Kirk laughed. "Well, he can hold on to that for a while longer - it'll maybe teach him to be a little more careful. He's fit for a debriefing, then?" he enquired casually.

McCoy glanced across the ward to where Sulu was lying with his eyes closed. "The sooner the better, I think, Jim. That's the orderly arrived from the lab now. McCoy out."

The orderly handed over the antidote to McCoy, who checked the contents.

He was about to inject Spock when Kirk arrived. Sulu was sitting up again, and blushed when his commanding officer looked at him.

"I'm sorry, sir," the Helmsman murmured.

Kirk nodded an acknowledgement, but his attention was on McCoy. "Well?" he demanded.

McCoy was examining the panel readings closely, and it was a few seconds before he turned his attention to the impatient Kirk.

"Something's happening. The poison in the bite works like a paralysis drug. Quite common with predatory insects. They like their food alive and kicking. The effects might well have worn off in time, but this should be a lot quicker. I imagine he's going to feel sore and even rather sick for a day or two. The antidote contains a couple of things that usually upset our Vulcan." Then more casually, "You spoken with Morris or Tomlinson yet?"

Kirk eyed him quizzically. "What if I have?"

"Just curious, I guess. Sulu's given me his side of the story, I'd like to hear the rest."

Kirk didn't answer at first, but gazed at the still unconscious Vulcan. "His colour looks better, or am I imagining things?"

"No, you're right. Bodily functions are beginning to return to normal. That's fine, Mark. Pass my compliments on to the rest of the lab, will you."

"Sure thing, Doctor. We're glad to have been able to help. Johnstone was pretty upset when he brought that scorpion in."

As the orderly left McCoy turned to Kirk and grinned. "At this rate you're going to have so many culprits you won't know who is to blame."

"Blame will be apportioned where it lies, Bones. So far it seems to have been a chapter of petty accidents. When can I talk to Spock?"

"Talk or interrogate?"

"For someone who was only too keen to blame Spock a short while ago, you seem to be being very protective all of a sudden."

"Hardly protective, Jim, but I did hear you speak to him while we were still in the cave."

"So? He was in charge. Blame automatically follows authority. He'd be the first to accept that." Kirk had been watching the Vulcan closely, and had seen his eyelids flicker. "Spock, how do you feel?"

"Unwell."

"Teach you to go caving without protective gear?" McCoy asked whimsically.

Spock regarded him through half closed eyes. "Possibly."

Kirk grinned, started to say something, when McCoy touched his arm.

"Let him sleep, he needs it. Have you eaten yet?"

"No, why?"

"I thought we could maybe talk?"

With a last glance at Spock they made for the ward door.

Two days later Kirk regarded most of the members of the abortive landing party across the briefing room table.

"I've read all your reports and find it difficult to see anything to commend anyone for. Sulu, you had been given strict instructions as to your examination of the caves. Excitement is no reason to forget orders. You were lucky your injury was as slight as it was.

"Morris, you were already aware of the effect the rocks had on our instruments; staying so close to the cave meant you were both unable to contact us or receive our call. Consequently, you caused us a lot of unnecessary worry.

"Johnstone, you should have made sure the insects you had collected were secure. You are, after all, an entomologist, and therefore aware of the likelihood of their being venomous.

"In short, we can count ourselves lucky that the consequences of what, admittedly, were a number of small mistakes were not a lot more serious. I hope that you have all learned from this, and that you have all realised that experience does not compensate for sloppiness. I do not look leniently on anyone making the same mistake twice. Has anyone anything to say?"

Silence greeted him for a moment, then Sulu, who had obviously been appointed spokesman, said,

"We know apologising won't change things, Captain, but we truly are sorry. All we can say is that we have all learned from our mistakes, and will endeavour to be more careful in future."

Kirk nodded. "As long as you have learned that carelessness costs lives out here, then I think you can put it all down to experience. I think that is all, gentlemen and ladies."

Kirk stood up to leave, the rest rising with him. He was stopped by a query from Johnstone.

"How is Mr. Spock, sir?"

"Oh, he's recovering. Dr. McCoy seems to think he's well enough to leave sickbay. Apparently he has started to answer back."

Kirk's keen gaze swept over the group in front of him. The smiles told him a lot. Maybe McCoy had been correct when he'd said that the crew expected him and Spock to argue. If they didn't then there had to be something wrong.

Possibly they'd all learned something, not least himself and McCoy.

Smiling, he left the room. He had a chess game to go to.



REVENGE FOR BABEL

by

Jean Sloan

(The events herein take place immediately after the episode 'Journey to Babel'.)

"Captain's Log, Stardate 2738.3.

"We have at last delivered our charges to the planet Babel for the Coridan conference. I am not sanguine about its success. One attempt has already been made to sabotage talks; the Orions have a lot to lose if Coridan comes under Federation protection. I have a disconcerting feeling that our troubles may not yet be over.

"The Enterprise is to remain in orbit for the duration of the talks. I intend to maintain yellow alert while we busy ourselves repairing the damage sustained in our encounter with the Orion suicide vessel."

Captain James T. Kirk stretched in his chair, then winced. Dr. McCoy had warned him to take it easy - perhaps he shouldn't have swum 50 lengths of the pool. His wound seemed to have healed, but he kept getting twinges...

The intercom buzzed, disturbing his reverie. "Scott here, Captain. Sir, ma' engines need a complete overhaul. I've contacted Babel, but they don't hold stores of the parts I need. I've been able to synthesise some odd mathoms, but I've a list of bits and pieces that I canna make and I canna do without."

"All right, Scotty. What's the nearest base with the sort of technical facility you require?"

"Er..." There was a pause. "I think it's Pandora, sir." Scott sounded embarrassed.

James Kirk sighed. "Mr. Sulu, set course for Pandora."

Spock swivelled round in his chair and raised an eyebrow. Kirk caught his look, and sighed again.

"Mr. Scott, can we manage warp 6?"

"I think warp 4 would be more advisable, sir."

"Okay, Scotty, warp 4 it is. Kirk out. Miss Uhura, inform the authorities on Babel of our intentions. Spock, how long...?"

"Four days, five hours and thirty-six minutes for the round trip, Captain, assuming 24 hours stopover at Pandora."

"Uhura, inform Mr. K'tana that we will be back in plenty of time to pick up our passengers."

.

Pandora was not in the top ten salubrious resorts in the galaxy. Historically established as a central point on deep space shipping lines, a place for all races and all fleets to take on supplies, it had grown and developed as a centre where all peoples could meet in amity, or truce, or just-concealed hostility, in the interests of practicality.

It was governed by no one race, and that meant that it was not governed. The laws of the market place ruled. Anything which had a market, legally or illegally, was supplied. The Federation turned a blind eye - had to. To take an initiative in establishing law and order would mean dealing with the citizens of innumerable worlds; some of them, like the Klingon Empire, would take any interference with its nationals as a direct affront. The one advantage of Pandora was that any parts Scott might need would be available - at a price.

"Pandora on visual, Captain. I have Governor Drek on the line." Uhura's tone indicated that having the Governor on the line was not a pleasure.

"This is James T. Kirk, Captain of the USS Enterprise, requesting permission to put in to facilitate essential maintenance, Mr. Drek. My engineer needs certain parts which I am sure you can supply."

"We can certainly discuss a price," growled Drek, "but Kirk, keep your Federation troublemaking crew up there. I don't want any Starfleet uniforms here - they spoil trade." The Tellarite grunted disconcertingly.

"Believe me, Drek, I want what you want. I want to get out of here as quickly as possible. I'll get my Chief Engineer to prepare a manifest of parts, and I'll beam down myself to arrange payment."

"All right, Kirk, but no uniform and no Security men - you come alone. Beam straight into the Government building - the main transporter room is linked to this office by a series of elevators. Drek out."

Spock's brow furrowed at that. "Captain, may I have a word, please?"

"All right, Spock. Come down to engineering with me. I need to talk to Scotty."

As the bridge doors shut behind them Kirk directed the turbolift, casting a surreptitious glance at his First Officer as he did so. He suspected what was coming.

"Captain, there is no need for you to go planetside. It is not a safe environment. We are not in a state of amity with the Orions at the moment, and there is an Orion vessel in orbit. Also, there are many factions on Pandora who would see a Starship Captain as a very useful hostage. You are beaming into a public area where you will be an easy target. Finally, your wound is still troubling you."

These last words made Kirk pause for a second. He hadn't realised he had been so obvious. Spock's powers of observation never failed to surprise him. But Spock had been watching him very

closely since he had tricked the Vulcan into believing him fit for duty when Spock was needed in sickbay. Perhaps he was determined not to be taken in again.

"I'm not going to do a workout, Spock, I'm going to barter for goods - something I suspect that you would not be very good at. Your point about kidnap applies equally to you as well as to me."

"I was not necessarily suggesting that I go, Captain, but there are plenty of capable officers in Stores and Maintenance who could complete the job as ably as you yourself. Mr. Dersingham has shown his capacity for... er... barter on many occasions."

"I'm sorry, Spock - diplomacy says we must send a senior officer. If I send a lieutenant Drek will be so insulted that he'll tangle us in red tape for weeks. We can't afford that. I'm going, and that's that."

"Very well, Captain," said Spock stiffly, "but I must register my reservations in my personal log. Given that the encounter which damaged our engines in the first place was with Orions, I consider that beaming down onto a planet where they are present in force constitutes an unjustifiable risk."

"Do what you must, Mr. Spock." Kirk's voice had a sharp edge. Spock's words had irritated him slightly, mainly because he knew that the Vulcan was right.

"Captain, the ship which attempted to destroy us must have operated from a base somewhere..."

But Spock's words fell on deaf ears. They had reached engineering, and Kirk had engaged in animated conversation with Mr. Scott about parts and prices.

Spock stood for a moment watching, then he turned abruptly to return to the bridge. He was experiencing a tangle of emotions: annoyance with Kirk; frustration that Kirk would not listen; and - yes - fear. He tried to analyse. He had been horrified when after Sarek's operation he had witnessed Kirk collapsing, and had discovered the subterfuge that had put Kirk back on the bridge during the Orion attack; he was ashamed that he had failed to notice that Kirk was far from well when the Captain had arrived to relieve him and send him to sickbay; he had been deeply touched by Kirk's consideration, but also annoyed that the Human should risk his life so senselessly. Since then he had been watching Kirk closely, and it seemed to him that the stab wound was far from healed. He was annoyed that Kirk was risking himself again, needlessly.

But of what was he afraid? The nameless dread deep within him defied his attempts at analysis.

James T. Kirk materialised in the Pandora Omni-Hall, the place of government. The transporter chamber was large and busy, surrounded by moving walkways which led to the street, and by elevator terminals.

Slightly disorientated, he headed for the prominently signed information booth, where he explained his business, and the clerk directed him to the Section A elevators on the other side of the hall. He jostled his way in the indicated direction, fuming at what

he saw as Drek's deliberate attempt to make life difficult; he could have beamed straight into the Governor's office.

Kirk reached the elevators and joined the queue waiting to use them, cursing with frustration. As he stepped into line a cloaked figure barged into him, pushing him roughly. He opened his mouth to protest but caught his breath instead as a sharp pain stabbed at his side. He pressed his fingers to the spot, and as they came away red, pain burned through him. The room seemed to darken, and he knew no more.

On the Enterprise, Spock sat in the command chair, alert. He felt restless and anxious, troubled by the doubts he had expressed to Kirk before his departure, and by the nagging fear he could neither express nor define. He was also upset by the coolness of his last encounter with the Captain, though he would not admit it even to himself. To counteract the shocking turmoil in his emotions he sat overseeing the activity on the bridge with icy calm.

Suddenly he stiffened in his seat, overwhelmed by the certainty that something was very wrong. He directed his thoughts at Kirk on the planet's surface, trying to activate the delicate link between them, the resonance of shared mind-melds. There was nothing. The fact alarmed him. Kirk had only been gone for 21.56 minutes; he could hardly contact the Governor's office about the Captain's whereabouts on the basis of a premonition. If Kirk was there, he would be furious; if Kirk was not there, it would hardly be conclusive evidence that something had happened to him.

The bridge doors opened to admit Dr. McCoy, who was taking the opportunity of the stop-over to complete the crews' medicals. He was currently in pursuit of Sulu, who had managed to evade him twice. He crossed over to the command chair.

"Mr. Spock, can you spare Mr. Sulu for half an hour?"

For a moment Spock seemed not to hear, then without looking at McCoy he nodded. McCoy sensed the tension in the Vulcan; Spock's mask was firmly in place - too firmly, thought McCoy.

As the bridge doors opened to admit Sulu's relief McCoy said, very quietly, "What's wrong, Spock?"

Spock looked directly at McCoy. "Nothing, Doctor, with which you can help in any way at the present time."

McCoy frowned. "Are you ill, Spock? I've been concerned that the drug we gave you to promote blood production for your father's operation might have some lasting side effects."

"It is not my health that concerns me, Doctor."

McCoy's frown deepened, but he did not press further. "When I can be of help, I'll be in sickbay."

"I sincerely hope that I will not need to consult you, Doctor," replied Spock coolly.

The main hospital facility on Pandora was located near the

Omni-Hall. In the Intensive Care Unit an anxious-faced nurse bent over a pale figure on a bed.

"Dr. Rushton!" she called.

Bill Rushton, a Human doctor, came over and regarded the life support monitor for a second. "Put him on full support, Sophie," he said finally. "Has he been identified yet? I've done all I can for him."

"He was carrying no ID at all; perhaps he dropped it when he fell, or perhaps it was stolen," mused Sophie Nielson. "He's very good-looking. Someone, somewhere must be missing him."

Spock was missing him. When an hour had elapsed and he had not heard from Kirk he contacted Drek. Drek was abrupt and bad-tempered because Kirk was apparently wasting time. When Spock asked that a search be made for the Captain, Drek was dismissive, certain that the Human had been seduced into one of the bars outside the Omni-Hall.

Spock cut communications and paged Mr. Scott to take over. As he headed for the turbolift, McCoy and Sulu stepped out.

"Spock..."

"I am beaming down to the planet, Doctor. Captain Kirk has disappeared." With McCoy in tow, Spock strode along the corridor.

"Are you sure, Spock?"

"I am sure, Doctor, and I should not have delayed so long before acting." Spock filled McCoy in without mentioning his intuition on the bridge.

"Don't you think you're over-reacting?" asked McCoy as the transporter beam swallowed them. When they materialised on the planet he was saying, "... only an hour."

Spock stopped dead and looked McCoy straight in the eye. "Doctor," he said, "Vulcans do not over-react." Then, more quietly, "I felt his... pain." He hesitated on the word because it was not precisely accurate, but to explain at length would waste precious time.

McCoy caught his breath. Spock's admission both surprised and shocked him. Surprised him, that the Vulcan should make it; shocked him, with its implications.

"When, Spock?"

"Shortly after the Captain beamed down."

"Why did you wait so long to act?"

"Because I regret that, unlike Humans, I do not easily trust instinct." Spock's grimness convinced McCoy that the Vulcan was now desperately wishing he had not delayed.

They followed in Kirk's footsteps to the elevators, and within minutes were in Drek's office.

"Mr. Drek, Captain Kirk has disappeared. He should have been with you an hour ago. He would not have gone into a bar while on duty. I believe something has happened to him, something which would not have happened if you had permitted him to beam directly into this office."

"That would have been most irregular..."

"In any case it is immaterial," interrupted Spock. "I want you to institute a full search for Captain Kirk immediately. At your request he was not in uniform. I have reason to believe that he may be injured. Out of uniform he will not be easily identified. Finding him is your responsibility."

Drek looked surprised, then annoyed. "If he dies it will be most inconvenient for us all," he responded. "I will have the hospitals checked. While you are waiting, perhaps your engineer could provide me with a list of the parts he requires. He could negotiate terms if he came down in person."

"Drek, make your enquiries. No-one beams anywhere until our Captain has been found," said McCoy tartly. He was more worried than he cared to admit.

Spock's manner spoke volumes.

They waited in an ante-room to Drek's office. McCoy paced. Spock stared out of the window. Drek's secretary, a golden-haired felinoid of indeterminate race, growled softly, then spoke quietly.

"Gentlemen, I you with regret inform must. A man stabbed was - an hour since - in the main transporter centre. He taken was..." she consulted her vid screen... "to the general Hospital. It on the news was. I no report have on his identity or condition."

"Thank you, ma'am," said McCoy, grim-faced. "C'mon, Spock - let's go."

At that moment the door opened and Drek appeared. "Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy - it seems that the hospital near here has an unidentified admission, male, Earth-Human, suffering from a knife wound and poisoning. Not expected to live."

Minutes later Spock, McCoy and Drek beamed into the hospital via the Enterprise's transporter. Dr. Rushton was waiting for them. McCoy introduced himself as they entered the Intensive Care Unit.

"It is indeed our Captain." McCoy found he had been holding his breath.

Dr. Rushton paused for a moment then spoke quietly. "The wound itself is not fatal. When the Captain was brought in he was delirious, but he soon passed into a coma. The stab wound was caused by a stiletto-type knife with a hollow blade containing poison. The poison is on record; we administered an antidote immediately, but Captain Kirk was already in a weakened condition from the previous wound in his back. It was necessary to place him on full life support a short time ago."

As Rushton spoke McCoy was making his own examination. Dr.

Rushton did not seem to take offence, and when McCoy said, "He's right," to Spock, he smiled.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," McCoy said gruffly. "I had to be sure."

"You are friends." It was more a statement than a question. As he spoke Rushton looked curiously at Spock, who was standing rigidly, looking down at Kirk's still form. The Doctor moved to stand by the Vulcan. "He's being maintained by machine. There's little I can do. I'm sorry."

Spock did not move. "It is not logical to be sorry," he said, keeping his voice steady with an effort. "What will be, will be."

McCoy exploded. "Spare us your damned Vulcan fatalism, you cold-blooded son-of-a...! It's Jim lying there. He cares about you. Haven't you any feelings about...?"

His voice tailed off. He had pulled at Spock's arm to turn him, wanting to face him with his anger. The touch revealed to McCoy the tense trembling in Spock's body. His anger evaporated in a second. It had been born out of his own helplessness anyway. He turned to Dr. Rushton.

"Might we go over the records of the poison and its antidote, Doctor? Perhaps there's something..."

The two men left for Rushton's office. Drek, who had stood silent throughout, just inside the door, announced that he must log a report of the incident and set investigations in motion. As he left Spock said in a muffled tone, "You are looking for an Orion."

But Drek had gone.

For a moment Spock stood still, exerting control, trying to still the pounding in his chest and dispel the mist behind his eyes. He blamed himself. He should not have allowed Kirk to beam down. Later, he should have trusted the link with Kirk that he knew existed, instead of being afraid to acknowledge its reality. He should have beamed down immediately, saved the Captain.

The mist of tears threatened to blind him. Despising his own weakness he took a deep breath, a great gulp of air that sounded curiously like a sob. He reached out and touched the still form on the couch. The body was warm, alive. Spock could not shake the sense of horror at what he had allowed to happen. He had had a premonition of disaster even before Kirk left the Enterprise. He should have pushed harder, kept the Captain safe. Now it looked as though he had lost James Kirk.

No time to say goodbye.

He repressed the thought furiously and shuddered when he remembered the coldness between them when they had parted. His emotions were warring with his Vulcan control, and winning. Beneath the agony was the knowledge that he was in command of the Enterprise, and that he must act immediately. He wanted desperately to stay, to be with Kirk when... But McCoy would call him. Kirk's body was maintained by the machines for the moment, and McCoy would not give up.

He gently brushed aside the lock of hair that had fallen over Kirk's forehead; then he buried the turmoil of his emotions and

stepped back resolutely. The face he turned to the door was calm.

He found Dr. McCoy there watching him, his face drawn.

"Everything's been done, Spock. There's still an outside chance that another dose of the antidote might work, but it is a slim chance. I'm preparing a slightly altered formula."

"Understood, Doctor. We must take the Captain back to the Enterprise. You can work on your formula there."

The Vulcan's tone was cold and distant. McCoy recognised the coldness for what it was - Spock's iron determination to control.

"If you will arrange to transport Jim to the Enterprise, I will join you shortly. I must see Drek."

Spock was rather longer than he had anticipated. The Governor had made no progress with his investigation. Spock had not expected any more. In fact, Spock suspected that no investigation had been attempted. A result would be impossible anyway. Visitors to Pandora did not register their arrival. No-one had seen the attacker - or would admit to having seen him or her, and only Spock was sure that the Orions were involved. Even so, it must have been an opportunistic act - they could not have known that the Enterprise would visit Pandora. However, Kirk's conversation with Drek had been on an open channel, and could have been monitored by the Orion ship. The Orions were well known for seizing opportunities, which was why they made such proficient pirates. Interestingly, the Orion ship had now left Pandora's orbit.

McCoy remained dubious; on Pandora anyone might attack for any reason.

In the matter of bartering for Scott's parts, Drek had decided to be co-operative, perhaps because having a Starship Captain murdered on a base under his command would not look good. However, Spock did not notice any co-operation, and privately admitted that Kirk had been correct in judging his potential for barter as low.

When Spock returned to the ship he went straight to the bridge, resisting the longing to go to sickbay. He knew that his control was precarious, and he had no time to meditate, to restore it fully. The sight of Kirk's lifeless body would shatter it completely. He had duties to perform.

The bridge was subdued. As he entered all eyes focussed on him, and Uhura asked,

"The Captain, sir - any news?"

"I am about to ascertain." He called sickbay on the intercom, and Nurse Chapel answered immediately.

"There is no change, Mr. Spock. Dr. McCoy has completed his work on the antidote formula. He will try another dose in an hour's time to see if the Captain will respond, but he's not hopeful."

"Thank you, Nurse. Spock out." He turned to the helm. "Mr. Sulu, plot a course for Babel. Spock to engineering. Mr. Scott, have we warp capability?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock, but take it easy. We're still working on the warp drive. Warp 2 would be safest. I'll call you as soon as repairs are complete."

"Acknowledged, Mr. Scott. Mr. Sulu, implement at warp 2."

"Aye, sir."

As matters of everyday business occupied the bridge, Spock sat down stiffly in the command chair. It didn't feel right. He did not want it - command. If Jim died he would resign from Starfleet and return to the Vulcan Science Academy. His head and neck ached abominably. Perhaps McCoy could give him something. Was that an excuse?

Suddenly the urge to go to sickbay, which he had been suppressing furiously, surfaced. All was peaceful on the bridge.

"Mr. Sulu," he said quietly, "you have the con. I will be in sickbay if I am needed."

Sulu looked at him with compassion.

Spock was surprised. *Am I so obvious?* he thought with shame. He was unaware that his face was drawn, and unusually pale.

In sickbay the scene was a replay of that in the hospital on Pandora. Kirk's pale face lay on the pillow. McCoy stood considering the readings. At the expression on the Doctor's face, Spock's heart lurched, and he went cold.

"Nurse Chapel, call Mr. Spock." As he spoke McCoy began to work at the tubes and switches of the life support mechanism. "Tell him..."

"I am here, Doctor," Spock said tensely.

"Spock, he's improving. I'm just taking him off life support." McCoy finished what he was doing and stepped back, watching the monitors. "His vital signs are stabilising, I think..."

McCoy stopped in mid-sentence as Spock swayed and clutched the bed for support. The Doctor took his arm.

"Come on, Spock, lie down."

"No, Doctor. I will be recovered in a moment. I cannot understand what is wrong."

"I can. It's called exhaustion. You haven't recovered properly from that drug we pumped into you to operate on your father. That, coupled with the guilt you've been feeling for allowing Jim to beam down..."

"Guilt is not logical, Doctor."

"Which is why you're taking it so hard. You have the feeling to cope with, plus the added irritation at the illogic of the feeling. It's also possible that the drug has affected your nervous system, making it more difficult to control your feelings. Anyway,

it all adds up to exhaustion, and points to bed rest. You've nothing to blame yourself for, you know. Jim told me that you tried to stop him beaming down. I tried to talk him out of it too; so did Scotty. It's not your fault that he's such a pig-headed son-of-a-..."

"Who are you calling pig-headed, Doctor?" queried a weak voice from the diagnostic couch.

Dr. McCoy and Commander Spock turned as one.

"Jim!" exclaimed McCoy in some surprise. "How do you feel?" he added, staring at the readings on the diagnostic panel, which had strengthened remarkably.

"Sore. And tired. And I'm gonna be..." Kirk retched uncomfortably as Nurse Chapel proffered a bowl.

"Serves you right, too," said McCoy gruffly. "About time you learned to take notice of what we tell you."

He looked at Spock, who had risen from the bed upon which he had been sitting, and was now standing at the head of Kirk's couch. The Captain followed McCoy's gaze, then grinned at Spock.

"You were right, Spock - I should have stayed on board. Where are we? What happened after I butted out?"

Spock cleared his throat, then somewhat shakily started an explanation, but McCoy stopped him.

"Not now, Spock. He's too weak, and you're all in. Bed for you - here." He indicated the couch next to Kirk's.

Kirk's expression mirrored concern.

"It's all right, Jim; he's just worried himself sick about you - literally."

"Doctor, really!" The tips of Spock's ears had turned a slightly darker shade of green. He seemed to be unable to control anything. However, he was too tired to care, and McCoy was, frankly, correct in his assertion. He felt relieved that Kirk was recovering, and that the Captain seemed to bear him no grudge for his blunt words before the beam down. He looked over at Kirk from his now recumbent position on the couch and found the Human watching him.

Kirk smiled and said, very softly, "I am sorry, Spock. I really am."

Spock's heart was glad as sleep claimed him.

When he awoke he found he had slept for a little over twelve hours. Kirk was sitting up, supported by a mountain of pillows, pale and drawn but nevertheless consuming a vast quantity of toast and jam.

"Good morning, Spock," he said between mouthfuls. "How do you feel?"

"Recovered, Captain," Spock replied formally, swinging his legs off the bed.

"Now just one damn minute!" shouted McCoy, coming into sickbay from his office as he observed Spock's action. "Spock, you stay where you are." He reached the bed and motioned Spock to lie down. "Your blood pressure is raised, and you have all sorts of vitamin deficiencies and blood nutrient imbalances. It's the side effects of that damn drug. You're not leaving this sickbay until you're back to normal. Scotty has the con, the engines are fixed, and we'll be going into orbit around Babel in about thirteen hours. There's nothing for you to do."

"Yes, Captain McCoy," Spock remarked ironically.

Kirk grinned. "Leave him alone, Bones. He's had enough of people telling him what's what."

Spock raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Get him some breakfast."

McCoy harrumphed his way out of sickbay. Nurse Chapel entered to give Kirk some medication. While she was there Spock remained silent, slightly uncomfortable, knowing that he was about to be asked some difficult questions.

Breakfast arrived. He drank some Altair water, but couldn't touch the food. He felt Kirk's gaze on him.

"Bones told me your side of yesterday. How did you do as a trader?" Kirk's voice smiled, and Spock looked at him.

"I regret to say, very badly. Mr. Scott said that I paid twice what the engine parts were worth."

"That's not bad for Pandora. How did you find me so quickly?" It was the question Spock had dreaded. "McCoy said that you 'felt my pain'. How could you?"

Spock thought for a moment. "That was an inaccurate description. Rather, I sensed something - unease - then nothing, blankness. It is hard to explain." *In more senses than one*, he thought. "When two people have melded, if their minds are..." he sought for a word "... compatible, then a resonance of the meld can remain as a tenuous link."

"Can you often sense my thoughts?"

"I cannot sense your thoughts at all, Captain. It is only strong emotions - fear, pain, extreme joy - that could achieve the link. The link is perceived by the other... partner... as a sensation, fleeting, gone almost as it is realised, which is why I did not act on it at once. I did not really believe that the link was there."

"Why not?"

"Because you are not telepathic, Captain, and contact over such a distance is rather unusual."

"As I fell, stabbed, I was thinking that we hadn't parted on the best of terms, and that I didn't want to die without setting the

record straight."

"That fact concerned me also, Jim." Spock no longer felt awkward. Suddenly he no longer felt at war with his inner self.

"This compatibility of mind, Spock. It could be brought about by the closeness of friendship?" It was more a statement than a question.

"It could, Jim," replied Spock. Later he would have to meditate, to order his thoughts, to analyse; for now, he felt contentment.

Dr. McCoy reappeared and motioned a nurse to remove the breakfast things. He turned his attention to Spock.

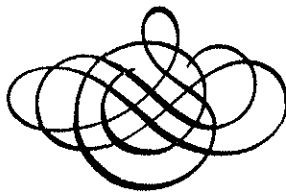
"Well, I'll be...!" he exclaimed. "Spock, your blood pressure has returned to normal. I'm beginning to believe in miracles." He glanced quickly at Kirk. "You can get up, Spock. I'll put you on a course of vitamins that should fix your blood imbalances and restore your emotional equilibrium." He grinned as Spock's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. "Should stop you shouting at the Captain."

"Bones..." warned Kirk.

"Anyway, some information for you both. That poison on the knife contained an extra ingredient, Orion in origin. That's why the antidote didn't work at first."

Kirk looked serious. "I wonder whether the motive was just revenge against me, or whether it was the prelude to another attempt to disrupt the Coridan debate?"

"I hope," said Spock, "that we will have neither the opportunity nor the necessity to find out."



CONTENTMENT

There is a peace in me I never dared
To hope I'd ever be allowed to feel;
The knowledge that at last I've found my path
To make my secret yearnings finally real.
If I can but hold fast to what I am,
And courage have to shape what I must be.
I rest now, confident that it will come.
I pray I may yet prove worthy of thee.



Sheryl Peterson

IT HAD TO HAPPEN TO ME THIS TIME - DIDN'T IT?

by

Joyce Devlin

Life on the Enterprise is never dull, and this mission was proving to be no exception to the rule. The planet Buskha had contacted the Federation Council with the view to joining the United Federation of Planets, and as usual the Enterprise just happened to be patrolling that particular sector at that precise time, and was assigned to the case, so to speak.

To let you understand the situation the way I see it, Buskha was crying out for help as her main source of trade is Buskhalite, a crystal similar to Dilithium, which was presenting the planet's defence system with a problem. The mining areas were constantly being raided, so in sheer desperation the Queen herself had contacted the Council and asked them to demonstrate their ability to protect her planet and people from outside raiders; if they proved that beyond a shadow of doubt the people of Buskha had voted to join the Federation, which would then have all trading rights. So we'd been sent in.

"Honestly, Jim, if they keep sending us in at every turn then no-one else is going to get the experience needed," I grumbled as we all sat around the briefing room table.

"If I had ten credits for every time I've heard that statement from you, Bones, I could retire in sheer comfort," Jim retorted.

"Is that so! But the question still remains, how are you going to handle the problem of the raiders when the Buskhalite presents us with the problem of useless sensors?" I asked.

"That, gentlemen, is why I called you all down here," Jim Kirk replied. "Spock, do you have any answers?"

"Captain, Buskhalite blocks out the sensors, rendering them impossible to use, especially in the mining areas where the mineral is concentrated. The raiders have taken advantage of that fact."

"Yes, Spock, we all know that; but what logical solution has that computer brain of yours come up with?" I answered sarcastically, receiving as usual a dirty look from Jim.

"Nothing, Dr. McCoy. At this present moment I do not have enough information to formulate a solution to the problem."

"Scotty?" Jim cut in, before I could say what I had to.

"What Mr. Spock says is right, Captain. It's going to be impossible to set up any type of early warning system near the mining camp at all, unless we can shield against the Buskhalite."

"So we have a big problem," Jim replied.

"No we don't," I piped up with a triumphant look on my face.

"All right, Bones, play your ace," Jim ordered; he knew me too well.

"Well, you lot must be totally thick. We have something on this ship at this moment that is quite capable of doing and being an early warning system."

"BONES!"

Jim's voice held a warning tone, so I decided to put him out of his misery and let him have my ace before it dawned on Spock who and what I was on about.

"Shadow and Lt. Anderson."

"Shadow? Bones, have you gone out of your mind?" Jim asked in total disbelief.

"Captain, the doctor has a valid point. The dog's hearing is remarkably highly tuned, as are all of his senses. It is the logical solution."

I looked in total amazement; for once Spock was agreeing with me! I could hardly believe what I was hearing.

"So you think it is feasible, Spock?" Jim asked.

"Yes."

"I like that! I come up with the solution and you don't believe me, but take that walking computer's word for it!" I flared up in anger. To be honest I'd had enough, and was seriously considering handing in my resignation at that point.

"Doctor McCoy, that will be quite enough of that!" Jim snapped sharply. Oh boy - now I was in for it.

Jim flipped the intercom to ship-wide, and trying to be as cool as possible he spoke into it. "Lt. Anderson to Briefing Room 1, on the double. Kirk out."

Within a few minutes the door opened and Lt. Anderson entered with Shadow, who now had the Captain's permission to walk at free heel - without a lead, in other words.

"You required to see me urgently, sir?" she said. At the same time Shadow sat beautifully at heel.

"Yes, Lieutenant. Dr. McCoy here informs me that Shadow is quite capable of acting as a type of early warning system, like our ground sensor units. Is that correct?" Jim asked.

"Yes, sir. He can detect and give the alarm - perhaps not at so great a range as the sensor units, but basically he can do the same job. And more. He can attack, track, find people buried under snow or rubble."

Believe you me, I felt like saying I told you so, but I was in enough trouble already, and no doubt given the mood I was in I'd say

too much.

The briefing went on for a full half hour, and for the duration of that time I remained silent, brooding, if you like. Well, who can blame me?

It was agreed that a Security detail, headed by Lt. Anderson and Shadow, would be sent down to the area most severely affected; also that the Captain and I would beam down to the palace, thus taking the bull by the horns and signing up Buskha as a member of the U.F.P. Spock would remain on board with Scotty. Well, someone had to stay at the helm, and I wasn't about to take command; once was quite enough, but that's a different story. Anyway, I'd learned from experience that to let Jim and Spock go galloping round the cosmos by themselves always ended in disaster for one or both of them.

As suspected, the raiders attacked the mine, unaware that Shadow was about. I'd love to have been there on the spot as they were foiled by the Security team, but I was stuck in the palace keeping an eye on Jim.

Anyway, to get to the point of the story, the Queen was highly impressed with the Security dog's ability, and it was agreed that a dog unit would be set up on the planet itself, and that there would be an investigation into Buskha's native canine race to find their own equivalent of the German Shepherd - well, I suppose it would have the advantage of not having to acclimatise to the planet if it was a native.

While we were discussing these additional points the palace shook violently.

"What the hell is happening?" I shouted over the noise.

"A Buskha quake," came the reply from the chief advisor who was sitting next to the Queen.

"A what?" Jim asked.

"I think your Terran term would be an earthquake, Captain."

"If this is an earthquake..." I didn't get the chance to finish what I was about to say. As the noise level rose to a screamingly high pitch I blacked out.

When I came to I had one thumping sore head.

"Bones, are you okay?" Jim asked as I slowly realised that I was lying on a couch, with the Queen looking highly concerned.

"You hit your head when you passed out, Bones," Jim explained.

"You're telling me!" I replied as I tenderly probed my head.

"You're going to need that cut sealed," Jim informed me.

"Who's the doctor around here?" I snapped.

"You are."

"Well, let me be the judge, then."

During this time the Queen stood by, mesmerised by the interplay between us. When the palace intercom bleeped into life it was to inform the Queen that the worst affected area was the general hospital, where the young prince was on a public walkabout. The hospital was partly in ruins.

"Captain?" the Queen said as she turned.

Jim was already on his communicator to Spock, who informed him that the 'quake was Force 10 on the Richter scale.

"Jim, get Lt. Anderson and Shadow over to the hospital. Shadow should be able to locate any survivors," I suggested. "Spock, can you beam down a medical rescue team and heat-seeking equipment?"

"Already assembling in the transporter room, Doctor."

"Right, get me over to the disaster area, Spock!" I ordered.

I'd no sooner said the words than the transporter beam engulfed both Jim and me, then reassembled us outside what used to be the hospital. Lt. Anderson was already there with Shadow.

"Captain," she said as the beam released us.

"Can Shadow locate survivors, Lieutenant?" Jim asked as he surveyed the rubble.

"Yes, sir. It would be better if there were more dogs to help, but... Come on, boy!"

"Dr. McCoy, you're getting as bad as the Captain and Mr. Spock for injuring yourself," Chris Chapel was saying as she fussed over the cut on my forehead, cleaning and sealing it.

"Stop fussing, Chris!" I snapped.

It was some time later that Shadow emerged from the ruins with a baby in his mouth, carrying it by the vest it had on. No sooner had he given up his charge to his mistress than he disappeared again into the same crack, only to re-emerge minutes later with another bundle.

The Security boys started to remove the rubble by hand until the space was big enough for me to crawl into; by this time Shadow had retrieved several more babies.

I crawled my way into the hole and reached what was left of the maternity ward. I passed out the remaining babies, then followed Shadow as he led me on; together we located the young prince at the far end of the ward.

By the time the rescue party reached us I felt as though I had been buried alive. Shadow was exhausted, I was exhausted, soaked with sweat, and black. However, Prince Sylakoq had sustained only minor injuries, much to the Queen's relief.

So Shadow had proved himself, in more ways than one.

But there was still a massive clean-up operation going on when I ordered Shadow, under a medical priority, to return to the Enterprise. I was concerned, as the dog was obviously in pain, and as I was no vet I was taking no chances. Jim agreed. I found minor muscle strain, and advised Lt. Anderson to make sure Shadow rested.

Several hours later, to our relief, the USS York signalled that her ETA was one hour. She had aboard six Security search dogs, especially trained for searching out bodies under these conditions; she also carried the biggest rescue unit Starfleet could muster at such short notice, and the top expert on geological faults, Dr. McKay, so the planet was now in the best possible hands.

So that was that. The clean-up operation was safely handed over to Captain Longford of the York, and we were on our way back to the Starbase to hand over the signed documents to a Federation representative so that Buskha could be registered as a member of the United Federation of Planets. And believe it or not, for once neither Spock nor Jim had ended up in sickbay. Amazing!

I was busy writing up my report for my personal log when Jim walked in.

"Busy, I see," he smiled as he plonked down two glasses and a bottle of brandy.

"What's this?" I asked.

"A peace offering," Jim replied.

"For what?"

"Well, I guess I did get your back up at the briefing, Bones, but it's just force of habit to ask Spock. I'm sorry," Jim explained as he filled two glasses.

"Well, I guess it shouldn't happen to a doctor, but with you and Spock around it always does," I replied as I fingered the cut on my head.

"You mean if it's not Spock or me in trouble, it's both of us." Jim smiled as the joke became apparent.

"Yep. Nine times out of ten it is," I replied.

"And the tenth time?"

"It's me. And one of these days I'm not going to be able to pull a miracle out of thin air and put you two together again like Humpty Dumpty."

"Humpty Dumpty?"

"Sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the King's horses and all the King's men, Couldn't put Humpty together again." I recited the old nursery rhyme.

"Humpty Dumpty, Bones?"

"An egg, Jim, which fell off a wall and smashed."

"Oh." He still wasn't quite on track.

"It's an old nursery rhyme my granny used to sing to me when I was a child. It would need a miracle to piece together a broken egg, right?"

"Wrong, Doctor." Spock's voice made us both turn.

"Spock! Come and join us," Jim invited.

"You were saying, Doctor, about a broken egg. If one took time and worked carefully, using the egg's own broken shapes as a guide, one could piece together a broken egg. It is not difficult. I have done it as an exercise in..."

"Spock, I was explaining to Jim about a nursery rhyme called..."

"Humpty Dumpty," Spock finished.

I stood and glared at Spock. "You walking computer! You'll be telling me next that your mother used to read nursery rhymes to you."

"You are quite correct, Doctor. She did, until my father explained the total illogic of them to her."

"Bones, don't start. Spock, that's enough," Jim commanded.

"Sir."

"Still say it needs a miracle to put you two back together again."

"I do not see the logic in comparing us to Humpty Dumpty," Spock said.

"Quite simple. You two get yourselves smashed up quite a bit, and one of these days I'm not going to be able to perform that miracle, right?" I exploded.

"May I point out, Doctor, that you were the one needing medical attention this time," Spock informed us.

"Lord, give me strength!"

As you can see, being Chief Medical Officer to these two is a full-time job, and boy, sometimes Humpty Dumpty doesn't have a look-in. And somehow I don't think I'm going to get to live this injury down for quite a while. Well, it's almost unheard of for Jim and Spock to come back unhurt.

It *had* to happen to me this time - didn't it?



A NICE TRY

by

Maria Swann

"Spock! Spock, are you awake?"

The whisper was very quiet, and would not have disturbed him had he indeed been asleep. The Vulcan smiled slightly in the darkness; how well this Human knew him.

"Come in, Jim," he replied softly, waving the lights to a dim glow that allowed Kirk to find his way to the bed. "I have been asleep, but I was certain that you would come."

"I meant to be here earlier," Kirk grinned, "but Scotty - well, you know. Everything's always an emergency. I suppose I could have waited until tomorrow, but..."

"I am pleased you did not. It has seemed long since we talked together."

"So, how do you feel, really?" Kirk asked, pleased by the knowledge that Spock had missed their quiet hours of companionship as much as he.

"Physically, a little weak, but well," Spock replied. "Emotionally, however - I feel a little foolish."

"What on earth do you mean?" Kirk perched on the edge of the bed. "I can't imagine you feeling foolish about anything, Spock. By the way, what's that perfume I can smell? It's a bit pervasive, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed. That is part of what I wish to tell you. The perfume belongs to Nurse Tirak - Rhian. You assigned her the task of caring for me."

"Well, I thought, another Vulcan... and knowing how Chris Chapel feels about you..."

"It was a kind thought, Jim. Did you know, however, that Rhian and I were childhood companions for a time?"

"No, she never mentioned it," Kirk said, surprised. "Now I wonder why?"

"No doubt she had her reasons," Spock said dryly. "Rhian always enjoyed having her own way. I think that in this instance she and my mother have formed a conspiracy to deprive the Enterprise of her First Officer."

"What?" Kirk sat bolt upright, his eyes flashing. "Has she done you any harm? Oh lord, I didn't think..."

"Please do not distress yourself, Jim. I am unharmed. Rhian is headstrong, but not careless, not ruthless. It is true, however, that while I lay in the healing trance she touched my mind and

created in my dreams a situation which she wished to bring about."

Slowly, Spock described the dream he had had, of his developing relationship with Rhian Tirak. Kirk was relieved to hear a note of wry amusement in his voice, although occasionally the tone altered to one of embarrassment at some turn of events.

The whole situation was so unlike Spock. For a start, the intensely private Vulcan would never have dreamed of discussing family matters in the public rec room, and would certainly never have caressed the girl, or permitted her to touch him, where any member of the crew might have come in. Nor would he have invited an intruder to share the time he spent with his friends; those hours spent quietly with Kirk and McCoy were precious to him. Only the vanity of a woman who believed or wished herself desired would have constructed such an incident.

Kirk had never allowed himself to speculate about his friend's sexual habits; it was possible that the Vulcan might have fantasised an interlude with an attractive woman, but he certainly would not have indulged himself on duty. Kirk had to restrain a chuckle; smooching in the turbolift - it was like something out of an adolescent fantasy. The curve of Spock's lips told him that his friend ruefully acknowledged how out of character the scenario was.

Spock fell silent at last, and Kirk nodded, rubbing the back of his neck.

"So you think she took the chance to plant a few ideas in your head, hoping they'd take root, huh?" he asked.

"I am sure of it, Jim. The curious thing is, she had no need to do so. I am well aware that I must eventually take a wife, and it had occurred to me more than once that Rhian, who shares my heritage and understands my childhood, might be willing..."

He faltered for a moment, and Kirk leaned forward to touch his hand in swift comfort. "I know what you mean," he said. "You could feel at ease with her. There'd be no need to pretend, to hide what you are. That's what you need in a wife, isn't it?"

"Yes, Jim." Spock smiled faintly at his friend's understanding. "But I have chosen my life here on the Enterprise, and I do not wish to lose it; if I do take a wife, she must accept that as part of me."

"And you think Rhian can't?"

"I do not know. Perhaps, when once she understands how much it means to me. But I do know that she - and my mother - would prefer me to return to Vulcan, to make my life there. I believe that she and my mother are engaged in a loving conspiracy to persuade me to do so."

Kirk smiled. "You can't blame a mother for wanting her son home," he said gently.

Spock's shy smile curved his lips again. "I do not blame her," he said quietly. "Indeed, I am... pleased that she should wish me home. And yes, I am flattered that Rhian wishes me as husband. That perfume - it is used by Vulcan women to please their husbands. You understand me, Jim? From what Rhian said, my mother told her that it would... lure me."

"In other words, Rhian came here all set to seduce you back to Vulcan. She used your accident to plant the thought in your head, and then followed it up by keeping you interested now that you're better. Is that how it is?"

"In essence, yes."

"And has she succeeded?" Kirk was very still as he asked the question. His tone was light, but the Vulcan could sense how much the answer mattered.

"No, Jim, she has not." In response Spock leaned forward to touch his friend's shoulder lightly. "It may be that we can make a life together, she and I, but it will not, cannot, be on those terms. I am a serving member of Starfleet, First Officer of the Enterprise, and your friend. Those things are important to me. If Rhian can accept that, and still want me, then perhaps... But I will not sell my soul for a life I do not want. As you would say, Jim, it was... a nice try. We will see how things turn out."

Kirk rose. "I really must go," he said softly. "You need your sleep, and so do I. I'm glad I'm not going to lose you, Spock. And I hope Rhian doesn't, either; I think she could be good for you - once we get her straightened out. Goodnight."

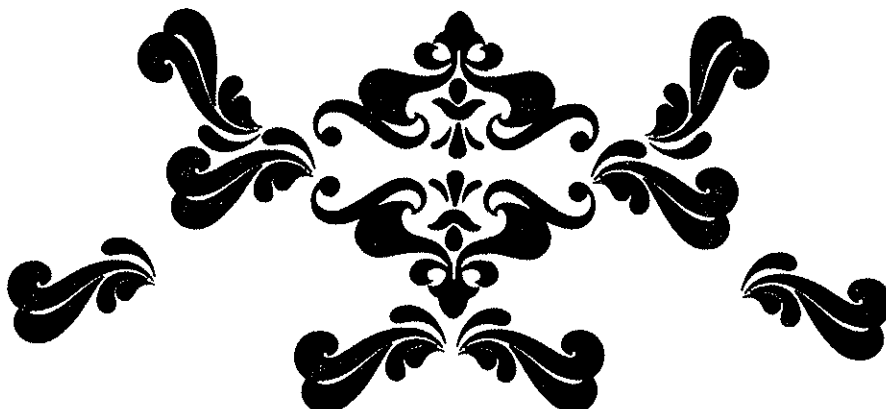
"Goodnight, Jim." Spock watched as the Human slipped quietly from the room, then lay back on the pillows to consider his future course of action.

Rhian Tirak would be puzzled to discover that from now on events would not move quite as she expected. He found that he was looking forward to the contest. In many ways, as he had said, she would be an ideal wife, but she had made one grave mistake. In her eagerness to make herself indispensable to him, she had not considered that Kirk was more than simply his Captain, and so her elaborate ploy had been wasted effort. He wondered if she could accept the change.

As he waved the lights down to darkness, Spock reached out along the silver thread that linked him to his brother.

Sleep well, T'hy'la.

And you, Spock, came Kirk's answering thought.





STARAFEL

by

Alinda Alain

Sequel to 'A Little Less Me, A Little More You', Log Entries 69.

A runner came by night. Young, dark-eyed, dark-haired, with a lean, cat-like masculinity, the man moved deeper into her domain. Though he ran with surprising stealth for one obviously not wild-born, the senses of the forest denizens detected him easily and kept her informed until she felt inclined to investigate personally.

She was Starafel, a warrior of the matriarchal world Hiya. A soldier of the First Rank, she was on leave from her duties and deep in rapport with her liah stone.

Nevertheless, this occurrence was unusual enough to draw her back to the here and now of Cearan's Dark Forest. Rising from where she lay among the branches and limbs of a tall tree, Starafel dropped lithely to the ground and walked into the runner's path in order to meet him.

"Man," she whispered, so as not to frighten him.

He veered away from her unexpected presence. Reaching out she caught his arm and held him against his desperate but skilled efforts to free himself.

"Be still. I mean you no harm."

He struggled a moment longer before submitting. Yet his body remained tense, ready to fight or flee at the first opportunity.

Starafel examined him with her eyes. His garment, a black one-piece outfit with a flowing black cape and hood, was ragged, torn by the thorns of the forest in his headlong rush.

Releasing her hold on him she leaned against the trunk of the tree and folded her arms unthreateningly, keeping her hands away from the weapons she wore.

He looked at her, none of his subliminal apprehension lessening.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" she asked.

"You are not Klingon," he said, and his slanted eyebrows knitted in puzzlement.

She looked into his mind to discover of what he spoke.

"Ah, you speak of the Chavs."

Her sensitive hearing picked up the far-away sound of pursuit, as did his. He wanted to flee, and turned to do so, but she stepped into his path again.

"Stay," she ordered. "They do not normally come this far. Tell me, what is your name?"

Wary, fearing a trap, he hesitated, but the commanding power of her eyes and mind wrenched the answer out of him.

"Spock."

Spock. It fitted him, for the name was as mysterious and exotic in sound as he was in appearance. "Spock," she repeated softly, hypnotically. "Come. Walk with me. I will speak with the Chavs... or Klingons, as you call them. I'm curious as to why they hunt you on a world not theirs. To my knowledge, they have not permission to hunt anything on a Hiyan recreational world. Not even on a border planet like Cearan."

He fell into step with her, however reluctantly.

"Of what species are you, Spock?"

"Vulcan."

"Ah. An anarchist."

"I beg your pardon?" he questioned, not understanding.

"Your species belongs to a galactic organisation that opposes empires, does it not?"

"My homeworld is a member of the United Federation of Planets," he explained.

"Which opposes empires," she persisted.

"When they invade our territory and kill Federation citizens, yes."

"Ah-ha," she nodded. "The Chavs tell a different story."

"That is to be expected. They are our enemies."

"And you are theirs?"

"By their actions, yes."

They walked side by side among the trees, she carefully showing him how to move through the twisted, tangled roots that made travel in the forest difficult. He glanced at her, gratitude in the dark eyes, escape still on his mind.

The sound of pursuit echoed directly in front of them. She turned. Spock was faltering, trying to break away from her, but her look pulled him on.

"Do not fear. I will let no harm befall you," she assured him.

He didn't look convinced.

Starafel found a rock on the outskirts of the forest and sat down to wait. Spock stood to the side, a little behind her, still struggling to escape her power.

A group of twenty men dressed in silvery black uniforms came

into view.

The sight of them was strong enough to shatter her power over him. He whirled, intending to run. Starafel's hand closed over his arm, halting him, throwing him off balance. He fell to his knees beside her, his dark eyes looking up at her in accusation.

"Ye of little faith," she chided. "I said no harm would befall you. I am Hiyan. My word is truth."

"They are twenty, madam. With advanced weapons. While you are one - and have only a knife."

Her laughter filled the small glade. "Little faith," Starafel repeated. "I am Hiyan. Can it be you know not what that means?"

"This sector of space and its inhabitants are new to me," he admitted.

"I see. Then we will learn together one of the other."

"If we live," he said, his eyes going to the approaching men.

Her gaze followed his.

The Chavs were all males. Their empire had contacted the Hiyan Empire almost five y-seasons ago. She sighed. So many males (and how the Hiyan worlds craved males) but these were without the gentle beauty and polite upbringing of Hiyan males. Always with the Chavs there was an aura of cunning, ruthlessness, deceit. Starafel did not like them, but the Empress - always the tolerant one - had given them limited freedom within Hiyan space.

Spock rose to his feet, a tiny weapon suddenly in the palm of his hand.

No," she forbade, and his finger could not press the trigger.

Then the Chavs were surrounding them, bulky weapons drawn and aimed at Spock.

She stood, her left foot braced against the rock, and regarded the twenty with cold curiosity. Their auras were strange; hard, wild - characteristics totally unbecoming to a male.

One Chav's hand tightened on his weapon's trigger. A beam of energy erupted from it, hurtling towards Spock. Instantly Starafel was between the beam and its target, letting the energy wash through her.

"Cease," she ordered.

The beam continued several seconds longer before cutting off. She looked into the Chav's face and saw anger, hatred.

"Fool!" the Chav in command growled to his trigger-quick subordinate. "Put the disruptor away."

"That green-blooded Fed is armed!" the subordinate argued.

"That was an order, Krel!"

Grudgingly, Krel obeyed.

"My apologies, Ladycaptain. I am Commander Kor. Krel is new to our settlement, and unaquainted with Hiyan ways."

"Apology accepted, Commander Kor."

"I was not aware that any Hiyan warriors were on Cearan, Ladycaptain."

"Warriors are not. I am the only one," Starafel answered. "For what reasons would you need to know of my presence?"

The Chav leader's smile was broad - and false. "To honour you, of course, Ladycaptain."

"Thank you, but I require no honouring. I am in racylon."

"Ah yes. Meditative solitude. We will not disturb you further, then. I will take the anarchist and leave you to your seclusion." Kor indicated Spock.

"Take him? Have you permission from my Empress to hunt on Cearan?"

"No, Ladycaptain. But this is no creature native to Cearan's soil. His ship crashed here a few hours ago. We were hunting him in order to prevent his contaminating your empire as his kind has tried to do to ours."

Starafel nodded. "Very thoughtful of you. An anarchist in Hiyan space. The first to my knowledge. The Empress will be eager to examine such a rarity."

The Chav commander stiffened at her words. "Ladycaptain, he is a dangerous enemy. To bring him into the presence of your Empress..."

"Danger? What danger could he be to the Empress?" Starafel wanted to know.

"Well... er..." Kor faltered, knowing that no non-Hiyan was able to harm a Hiyan warrior. (Many a Klingon had tried during the first years of contact and had perished for their efforts.) "I do not mean to imply that he poses any physical threat to the Empress. The danger is more subtle. His kind are fanatics, and very persuasive liars. If you take him to the royal court there is the danger of his anarchist philosophy spreading, corrupting the unity, peace and order of the Hiyan Empire."

"Indeed," Starafel murmured, her gaze resting thoughtfully upon the Vulcan. "A possibility," she conceded. "I thank you, Commander, for the warning. Precautions will be taken."

Turning, she retraced her steps into the Dark Forest, guiding Spock beside her with a light touch on his arm. He was tense, expecting another energy beam to come hurtling at them.

"See, my word is good. No harm befell you."

"Yes. Your words are indeed truth, madam. I thank thee." His steps slowed as once again they entered the forest.

She paused, wondering at his hesitation. From his mind came the image of two males: one, fair in colouring, dressed in gold and

black, with eyes of hazel; the other, dark, wearing blue and black, with eyes of blue.

"Ah-ha. So there are others with you. Now I understand the reason for your noisy flight. You were decoying the Chavs away from your friends."

Spock's face drained of colour. "You are a telepath," his tone was accusatory, "and you have no respect for the privacy of a mind."

Starafel smiled, put out her hand to caress his cheek. "So begins our learning of each other. You resent my ability to look into your mind. Very well. I will not do so again, except on invitation or necessity. Come. Let us collect your brother/friends before the Chavs find them."

And so saying, she led him into the forest, taking a course perpendicular, then parallel, to his earlier flight path.

Back in the clearing Kor stood gazing into the forest where the Hiyan and the Vulcan had last been seen. Abruptly he turned and began to retrace their steps. His men fell in about him.

"Commander," Krel addressed Kor, "we cannot let a Starfleet officer have any prolonged contact with the Hiyan. The danger to the Empire's position in the eyes of Hiyan royalty is too great."

"I am aware of the danger, Krel," Kor growled. "More so than you, perhaps. Hiya, and her colonies, are rich in many minerals and resources vital to the continued expansion and supremacy of our Empire. The alliance with it is too valuable to lose."

"Perhaps it will not matter so much about the Vulcan's presence, Commander," another subordinate spoke. "Rumour has it that Krain, great-grandson of our Emperor, woos the Empress of Hiya successfully. Rumour says that he is now her favoured consort, and by the Hiyan year's end the Empress will choose a mate to father the royal bloodline and give her heirs to the Hiyan throne."

"Rumour," Kor's tone was one of disgust, "is nothing to place one's future and survival on. I know that particular Vulcan. He was the Enterprise's First Officer."

A collective outcry of surprise swept through the group.

Kor nodded grimly at their reactions. "Yes. That Vulcan is the one called Spock, and where he is, Kirk cannot be far away."

"But Kirk is a Starfleet Admiral now. And the Vulcan halfbreed is supposedly retired," the subordinate recalled.

"Old news," Krel snorted.

"Obviously," Kor agreed. "And if matters run true to form, where Kirk is, the Enterprise will be also. Fleet Commander Kang must be alerted at once. And we are returning to where the Vulcan shuttle crashed to search more thoroughly. It occurs to me that we might have been decoyed away from that area for a reason."

A grin appeared on Krel's face. "You suspect Kirk to be back at the crash site, injured and in hiding?"

"I do," Kor answered.

The group's pace quickened at this new prospect.

"Kirk," Krel murmured. "How I've longed to get my hands on him."

Kor nodded. "If he lives, we will have the key to control the Vulcan's tongue in the Hiyan court, and a hostage to keep the Enterprise at bay."

"Or to lure it into a trap."

"Exactly."

The two Humans lay side by side in the mud near the body of water which had swallowed their damaged scoutship.

"Where's Spock?" Leonard McCoy asked for the third time as he returned to consciousness and looked around.

"Decoying the Klingons away from us, Bones," James T. Kirk answered patiently. "How do you feel?"

"Awful. I think everything inside is broken. How about you? Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

"My tricorder and medikit. Where are they?" McCoy tried to lift his head, but had no strength for it.

"Lost. We barely got ourselves out." Kirk sat up slowly, his eyes scanning the terrain for danger.

"What happened, anyway?"

"Klingons," Kirk said simply, unable to call up enough energy to explain the details again to his friend. *Oh, Bones. What's wrong with you? You keep asking the same questions over and over again. And you're so pale, so limp.*

They had come to this uncharted region of space in search of the Enterprise, which had been under the command of the young and inexperienced Captain William Decker when it disappeared without a trace six months ago. Kirk, a member of Starfleet's Admiralty, had been so distressed and preoccupied at the news that he had accidentally crashed his aircar on the way home from a staff meeting, and had been left in a coma. His condition had drawn the attention of his two closest friends and former officers, Spock and McCoy.

Each man, for private reasons of his own, had resigned from Starfleet service. The Vulcan had become a recluse, and had moved into a community retreat similar to a Terran religious order of monks, while the doctor had taken refuge with the Fabrini, and had resumed his marriage relationship with Natira.

Though both had been settled and reasonably content in their respective life-styles, neither had hesitated to come to Kirk's bedside. Together the two friends had helped Kirk recover from his

injuries, and shortly afterwards the three had decided to go in search of their beloved Starship, whose crew complement consisted of many of their friends and former crewmates.

Spock had contacted members of his family on Vulcan, and made arrangements for himself and his two Human friends to join the newly commissioned and launched deep space research star vessel IDIC.

And thus matters had been for the three until recently, when reports came in from several privately owned ships that frequented the Federation border and this quadrant of space. The reports stated that a ship fitting the Enterprise's description had been seen being towed by unknown star vessels shaped like Terran scorpions.

The IDIC had had another commitment requiring its presence elsewhere for the next three weeks. Not wishing to wait in case the trail grew cold, Kirk and his friends had borrowed a shuttle specially designed for long-term deep space transportation and observation. It even had a cloaking device, which had (unexpectedly) failed at the worst possible time.

"And just what the devil are Klingons doing patrolling space hereabouts?" McCoy complained.

"I wish I knew, Bones," Kirk said. "I wish I knew." The Admiral wrapped his arms about the doctor to keep the shivering man warm.

"Did Spock have to leave us in the water?" McCoy continued, and Kirk realised that his old friend was making conversation in order to distract himself from the pain.

"It was the only way to hide us from the Klingons."

"Will Spock be back soon?"

"Yes, very soon," Kirk answered with more confidence than he felt. Silently he prayed, *Oh god. We've only been reunited for four months after three and a half very long years. Don't separate us again so soon!* And mentally, in a way he could not explain, he reached out to Spock, seeking reassurance.

There was no response. At least, none that his limited Human senses could discern. Finally, as his head began to throb from the effort, he gave up, returning all of his attention to McCoy.

The doctor's body was being wracked by icy chills.

"Bones, do you think you can hold on just a little longer?"

"Sure, Jim," McCoy managed to answer in that dry manner of his through the pain. "No problem."

"Good. It won't be much longer," Kirk promised again, but silently the Admiral realised that regardless of the danger he would soon have to build a fire.

"Just a little longer," he murmured, resting his chin on the top of McCoy's damp head, his own eyes beginning to close as exhaustion and exposure overtook him.

Time stretched into eternity.

"Speak to me, Spock. Tell me of the mission that brings you and your friends to Hiyan space uninvited," Starafel inquired, desiring conversation as she and the Vulcan made their way through the forest.

Spock hesitated, wanting to give some thought as to how he should answer. "We seek one of our fleet's exploration ships," he told her finally. "Six months ago it left port to begin a five year mission with a new Captain."

"Ah, a youngster. Quite competent, but not the ship's true master. Perhaps it has rebelled against the unfamiliar touch."

At her words the Vulcan favoured her with another of his suspicious glances. As far as he could discern, Starafel had kept her promise and ceased her mental control of his mind and body. He had immediately strengthened and reinforced his telepathic shields, although he suspected his efforts would do him little good should she wish to break through them and resume her manipulation.

"Perhaps," he conceded, thinking it wise not to debate words and literal interpretations with the Hiyan.

"Your mission here is to find the ship and reunite it with its true master," she continued. "The one whose image you hold in your mind that radiates like warm golden sunlight."

Her description was a bit too much for his masculine sensibilities. "Tell me of your world, Ladycaptain. Its cultures, peoples, their origins," he interjected, seeking to change the subject and ease his discomfort.

Starafel laughed softly, perceiving fully what he was doing and why. *You, too, are from a culture similar to the Chavs, she reflected. So closed and fearful of feelings and expressions, thinking they somehow make you less masculine. What an odd self-view, thinking yourselves male or female by your actions, instead of by biology. Yet in spite of that there is a difference in you, a pleasing difference I've yet to see in one Chav. Whereas they seem to have destroyed all that is gentle and caring in their natures, you have not. It is there, but you hide it, guard it, revealing it only in your deepest thoughts.*

"As you wish," she said. "Let me tell you of Hiya, its peoples, and its worlds."

Kirk realised that he was beginning to lose his own tenuous hold on reality. At some point he pulled himself and McCoy out of the water and started a small fire. Then resettling the doctor's head on his lap the former Captain of the Enterprise continued the wait for his Vulcan friend.

As they neared the edge of the forest Spock found it easier to keep pace with Starafel. He also found her commentaries and descriptions of Hiya to be intriguing. Nevertheless, as the minutes

went by it became more and more difficult to concentrate on her words. Beyond the perimeter of his mental shields something - or someone - called to him. Fearing that it might be Starafel, he at first refused to acknowledge the pull, then a new realisation dawned: JIM.

His Captain and friend could be in distress and in need of him. So thinking, he carefully began to lower his shields.

Soon the warmth of the fire revived the Humans a bit.

McCoy stirred. "Jim?" he called.

"Yes, Bones."

"Are we on the ship?"

"No."

"Then... where?"

Kirk straightened slightly, his gaze sweeping the glade. "We're on a Class M planet somewhere along the galaxy's rim."

"Whatever for?" McCoy grumbled.

"Trying to avoid the Klingons, old friend." While silently he reproved himself damningly. *Old enemies we ran into during this insane search for our ship... my ship. MY ship. She's lost to me, and now I might lose my two best friends. I'm so stupid - why couldn't I leave well enough alone?*

McCoy began to cough, and the firelight showed flecks of blood about his mouth. "Did I tell you... I'm going to be a father again soon?"

"No, Bones, you didn't." What new hallucination was this? Kirk wondered.

"Yep." The doctor paused to cough again. "Natira... is due to deliver in... about three months."

"What?!" Kirk felt a fresh wave of guilt and grief wash through him. "Oh, Bones. I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me? Why did you come with us?"

"Natira sent me." McCoy managed a lopsided grin through the pain. "She's quite an understanding lady, when it comes to matters of duty."

"I don't doubt that. You don't lead an entire culture of people halfway across the galaxy in search of a new world without a commitment to duty," Kirk commented absently. McCoy was dying, he realised, heartsick. He could feel his friend's life force slipping away.

"Yep. I'm going to be a father again," McCoy murmured weakly. "And this time... this time it's going to work. This time I'm going to do it right. This time I'll keep my... priorities straight. Wife and child first. Work, second."



"Of course you will, Bones." Kirk shook his head sadly, fighting back the tears of grief.

"Jim. A little advice. For you and Spock." McCoy's voice was getting weaker, barely audible. "The two of you had better find yourselves... good women... marry... start your families. It's a man's only hope of... immortality."

"Bones. Bones?" Kirk felt a scream building, felt his own heart stop as McCoy drew a last breath. "Bones!"

Reality seemed to recede around him. *No. No. This can't be happening.* His mind, so recently traumatised, fought to retreat from yet remain in touch with the here-and-now. The contradictory effort was so draining that Kirk only vaguely perceived that the fire had spread to the nearby leaves, and was reaching into the bushes and trees.

McCoy was dead.

\Spock?\

There was only silence.

The Enterprise and her crew, missing, gone.

He was alone.

Starafel increased her pace, striding through the shades and shadows of the forest. Beside her, his anxiety growing every second, moved Spock.

"Are you well?" she asked lightly, sensing the cause of his uneasiness.

His dark head shook ever so slightly, the moon's rays reflecting blue-black off his silken hair. "My friends. They... are dying." His voice and eyes held a depth of misery that cut her to the heart.

She nodded, reached into his mind (without his noticing) and followed the fragile thread of contact emanating from his mind to the one called Kirk.

"I must leave you," she told him a second later. "Your friends are surrounded by flame and smoke. Follow quickly, but be cautious. Do not let the Chavs see or take you. They will not hesitate to kill you instantly."

Then - to his slower perceptions - she disappeared.

She moved in the world of light. Every muscle and reflex honed to its utmost potential, Starafel sped through the Dark Forest, but even this accelerated state would not be fast enough to save Spock's brother/friends.

There was only one other way to move faster. She emitted a low-pitched, bird-like sound. It filled the night and spread through this dimension of the forest like a rushing breeze.

Seconds later her call was answered. From out of the sky a powerful winged creature appeared, circling. She called again, and the pegazoid descended.

Emerging from the brush and trees, Starafel raced across the meadow. The pegazoid's hoofs lightly touched the ground as its wings slowed its well-proportioned silver-white body almost to a standstill. Starafel's leap carried her gracefully, unerringly, to the pegazoid's back.

"Ah, I'm so glad to see that you were in the neighbourhood, Tekkor. I have need of your great speed. A fire rages to the north of us back on the Dimensional Time Plane."

Tekkor snorted, shaking her white, horse-like head.

"Do not fear. You will not be in that dimension long enough for anyone to shoot at you. I go to put the fire out before it consumes everything; but also, there are two males I need to find, so fly swiftly."

Tekkor's powerful wings lifted them into the night sky. Seconds later, they were within sight of the fire.

Starafel took stock of the situation. The fire was spreading outwards, away from the small stream. Her awareness located two alien life-forms that could be none other than Spock's companions. One's life force was beginning to disengage from its physical body.

"I must put out the fire, Tekkor," she yelled.

Understanding, the pegazoid slowed, hovering.

"Guard yourself against my power, Tekkor," Starafel warned as she unlocked the pathways in her mind that led to the knowledge of element control.

Obediently the great winged creature raised its mental shields and summoned the knowledge of self protection.

A silver-blue aura of light enveloped Starafel as she concentrated, gathered and directed the laws of nature. She spoke; her words held the power of thunder. Then, with outstretched hands, fingers spread apart, she called forth the rain in a season not meant for it.

Lightening leaped from her fingers and was echoed in the clouds forming about them. Then, with a downwards sweep of her hands, she sent the cold, the lightning, the water down, down, down to drown the flames and scatter the suffocating smoke.

Vaguely Kirk perceived movement about him. A tall, dark figure loomed over him. Instinctively, he cradled McCoy closer.

"Do not fear," a woman's voice said. "I am here to help."

Her hands settled on McCoy's forehead and chest. "His body is weak, but I have called the spirit back and have begun making the necessary repairs. You, also, are in need of healing."

Slender fingers stroked Kirk's forehead, and immediately his

vision began to clear, his pain and lethargy dispelling.

"Who are you?" the Admiral asked as the woman knelt, gathering McCoy into her arms.

"Come," she ordered, and rose to her feet, cradling the doctor. Turning, she led the way to where a giant white winged creature stood pawing the ground restlessly.

Kirk did a double-take. "A unicorn - with wings!" he muttered incredulously. Obviously, he was still delirious.

The woman leapt gracefully to the creature's back, McCoy's weight apparently no problem for her. "Come," she said again, and held out a hand to Kirk. "Get up behind me and take a good hold around my waist."

Kirk did as instructed. "Where are we going?"

"To find Spock before the Chavs do."

"Spock! Alive?"

"Of course. It was through him that I found you."

Joyous relief filled Kirk, to be almost immediately suppressed by nausea and vertigo as the winged unicorn galloped across recently charred but now wet grass, glided across the narrow stream and climbed into the night sky on powerful wings.

Kirk fought for breath and balance, finally closing his eyes.

"Do not fear. Tekkor is a competent flyer."

Kirk risked a peek, but the vertigo returned, forcing him to reclose his eyes. The creature's flight was smooth, Kirk admitted, hardly noticeable except when he looked. He decided not to open his eyes again until the ache in his head was completely gone. Instead he concentrated on maintaining his hold about the woman's slim waist, pressing himself close to the warm feminine body which radiated a soothing calm, confidence and power.

For a long moment Spock stood staring in disbelief at the sight descending from the sky to settle in the tiny glade before him. Then, becoming aware of the presence of the Humans, he moved forward to help his two friends. Both were injured, but as he held them close he sensed that they had undergone some kind of advanced healing treatment.

When his examinations of Kirk and McCoy were complete he looked up at Starafel. "Thank you," he said simply.

"You are welcome," she replied, noting that he had a supportive and protective arm about each Human. "Do you require aid in anything else?"

Spock considered as he settled each of the Humans more comfortably on the soft grass. "Our transportation is destroyed, and my friends require extensive rest and nourishment."

Starafel nodded. "My ship returns within seven Cearan days."

She turned and patted the white winged creature, who snorted and galloped away, leaping into the air just before it reached the high grass and trees which surrounded the glade. Within seconds it was lost to sight.

"What was that creature?"

"The one you call Kirk labelled it a winged unicorn. I call Tekkor's species pegazoid." Starafel paused to look about the glade. "This is a good place to camp. You three will rest here. I will guard you and bring you supplies."

Rising from where he knelt beside his friends, Spock looked into her eyes, dark depths of mystery and kindness. He started to speak, to again express his gratitude, but she vanished from his sight like before.

Tired from her exertions, Starafel returned to her meditative retreat, but before losing herself in the otherworldly peacefulness, she gave instructions to Tekkor and others of the forest denizens to watch over the three aliens.

One of the great cats, Ekaz, took on the task of supplying the two Humans with small game meat. A tribe of anthropoids (some large, others small) volunteered to supply eatable fruits and vegetables especially suited to the Vulcan's nutritional needs.

Realising, however, that the three were not as attuned to nature as she, Starafel gave strict instructions to all of her wild-born friends not to allow themselves to be seen by the three aliens.

Kirk and McCoy's recovery from their injuries progressed incredibly fast, a fact which Spock attributed to Starafel's mystic ministrations. But while grateful for the special care given to all of them by the Hiyan, the Vulcan realised that all too soon the novelty of their situation would wear thin for the Humans, allowing boredom and restlessness to set in.

"So, where do we go from here?" McCoy asked.

It was the sixth evening as they sat around a small fire under yet another clear night sky.

"Nowhere, apparently," Kirk answered dryly.

Early in the day he had taken it into his head to check on the doings of the Klingons, only to find all attempts to leave the vicinity of the glade blocked by a small herd of creatures resembling Earth's African elephants.

"Do you think our lady friend is responsible for our imprisonment by this planet's wild life?"

"I'm sure of it," Kirk answered the doctor, and shifted his gaze to Spock.

The Vulcan, who had been taking the opportunity to meditate, sensed the attention being directed to him. Coming out of the

introspective state, he met Kirk's gaze.

"Is something wrong, Admiral?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock. We did not come to this quadrant of space to go camping. We need to get off this planet and back to our search."

The Vulcan took a minute to absorb the emotional outburst of his friend. Five years apart from Humans had left him a bit out of practice with guarding himself; but the joy of being back with them more than compensated for the discomfort.

"Jim, I understand your impatience, but there is nothing that we can - or should - do about our current situation."

The Humans looked at him with some surprise and sudden concern.

"What's the matter, Spock? Has our lovely rescuer woven a spell of contentment within your soul?" McCoy asked in jest, not knowing how close he had come to the truth.

"No, Doctor. I am merely saying that in order for us to accomplish our mission of finding the Enterprise and her crew we will need the assistance of a native of this quadrant. Starafel is a Starship commander of the Imperial fleet that patrols this region. If we approach her correctly, I believe that she can and will help us."

"Greetings, Spock."

The three men turned to find Starafel standing just a short way from the campfire.

"Good evening, Ladycaptain," Spock addressed her, rising to his feet respectfully. Kirk and McCoy rose also.

Starafel took a moment to favour the Vulcan with a warm smile before focusing her attention upon the one called Kirk.

"Your brother/friend speaks the truth, Admiral Kirk," she addressed the Human. "I have searched my memories and it seems I do have knowledge of your ship. It was found by one of my fleet's scouts six of your months ago, inoperative from an encounter with the Veil of Light."

"The energy barrier," Spock clarified for the puzzled Humans.

"The ship, along with its Captain and crew, was taken to the nearest of our colony worlds to be examined by the scientists there. When I left them to come here for my renewal, no information had yet been obtained on its origins. But the image in Spock's mind and yours, Admiral, matched the vessel reported to have been found."

"The ship, the crew - were they all right?" Kirk asked.

Sensing a concern not unlike the one she held for her own ship and crew, Starafel gave him a look of understanding. "To my knowledge there were no injuries which were not repairable."

Kirk released a breath that he hadn't realised he was holding.

"To the ship or the crew?" McCoy, not of the Starship command mentality which tended to give inanimate machines life, demanded

clarification. Besides, the comment about the crew being examined by Hiyian scientists made him uneasy.

"Both, Dr. McCoy," Starafel assured him.

"What happened to them?" the doctor wanted to know.

"As with all things not properly prepared, they attempted to enter the Veil and were repelled."

"So the new enhanced deflectors and warp drive were not strong enough to withstand the distortions after all." The Admiral gave a shrug of disappointment, but it was only for a moment. With a barely suppressed eagerness he asked, "When can we see them?"

"My ship will be arriving within the hour. Once aboard I will contact the Empress and inform her of your presence and identity. I have no doubt that she will be curious to meet you." Starafel took a moment to do some quick calculations. "I believe that within two of your weeks you will be reunited with your ship and the friends and crewmates aboard it."

Two weeks. Fourteen days. Kirk found that he could hardly believe their good fortune. He turned to lock gazes with Spock, and found the Vulcan looking back with an expression of satisfaction and relief - for him.

Abruptly, Kirk's joy dimmed. Back on Earth, when he had awakened from the coma, Spock had assured him that he would not contemplate a return to Vulcan until the fate of the Enterprise and its crew had been determined. Now suddenly it seemed that the unknown was resolved. Was Spock so eager to leave him and McCoy again?

"Jim?" Spock, sensing but not understanding this new distress, moved to stand closer to him.

"Nothing, Mr. Spock. It's nothing." Kirk, not wishing to voice his fears, explained, "I'm just overwhelmed that the search is finally over and that all is well."

"I do not wish to detract from your joy, but there will be a few... difficulties for you to overcome," Starafel interjected.

"I knew it!" McCoy groaned. "I just knew that had to be a catch."

"What difficulties?" Kirk demanded.

"The Chavs, or Klingons, have established diplomatic relations with my Empire. Your Federation has not. They are allies, while you are declared enemies. I've not heard of it happening yet, but I do not doubt that sooner or later they will make a claim for the ship and its crew."

"Will your Empress grant their request?" Spock asked.

Starafel hesitated. How could she explain to these three alien visitors the situation she would soon be taking them into?

The Empress' marriage season was approaching, and every warrior in the Empire was on the lookout for good mating stock to present to the royal court. Though she had helped them more out of curiosity

and a dislike for the Chavs than to obtain a prospective husband for her monarch, Starafel had to admit that the idea was now beginning to appeal to her; and being familiar with the Empress' taste in males, she had little doubt that these Federation men would more than distract her queen/ruler from that revolting Chav, Krain.

"I suspect that your arrival at court will give her pause," Starafel said finally. "The Chavs have had several years to present their version of your Federation, its practices, philosophies and citizens. Now, finally, you will have an opportunity to speak for yourselves."

"In other words, if we want to see our people and ship again, we had better be on our best behaviour," McCoy simplified.

"You speak truth, Dr. McCoy."

"Then that is what we will do," Kirk stated with renewed confidence, looking from Starafel to Spock and back. His earlier feelings of joy returned. The hope of getting the Enterprise back intact and her crew alive and well now lay before him.

It would not be easy, but then perhaps he had never wanted it to be. He thrived on adventure and challenge.

He would regain his ship.

And he would persuade Spock to stay, to remain at his side and resume their adventures among the stars.

Together.

Somehow, some way, he would accomplish both.



LOST IN ORBIT

You cannot understand
Why it should hurt me
To share your pain
But never share your mind.
To never ever feel you
Close beside me,
To know I'll never fit in
With your kind.
A moon that orbits blindly
On the fringes
Of a planet I am not
Allowed to know.
You bind me with your chains,
But leave me trapped there,
And neither bring me home
Nor let me go.



Sheryl Peterson

INTERLUDE

by

Krysia Baczala

Casting aside the stylus, Kirk leaned forward with a heavy sigh and rubbed at his eyes with the palms of his hands.

He had been sighing a lot recently. He couldn't remember ever having felt quite so tired. He seemed to have a perpetual headache.

Three strenuous missions, one after the other; gruelling physical activity; several minor injuries which never seemed to have enough time to heal properly before the next one occurred; and paperwork, paperwork and more paperwork.

Kirk knew that he was feeling depressed. Ordinarily, if a phase of melancholy troubled him for a while, it would usually pass quite quickly. He knew he was normally a positive and content, if not happy, person; yet for the last two weeks he just couldn't shake off this feeling of depression.

Knowing you are depressed, however, doesn't help to alleviate the symptoms.

He felt permanently lethargic, he had no appetite, no desire to work, and even the most trivial task had recently seemed to require a supreme effort. Everything was somehow mundane, even boring.

Daily he dragged himself to the bridge. He appeared to be trapped in a downward spiral. The worse he felt, the harder his work seemed and the greater the backlog of duties and unsigned reports became.

Because of this he felt increasingly inadequate. He didn't meet his own high standards, and he felt guilty at not being up to date with everything. This, in turn, made him feel even more dejected.

One of the symptoms seemed to be to indulge in what he was doing now. He would catalogue in his mind all his ills, all the things that troubled him, and all the jobs he should have done but hadn't. Feeling sorry for himself, and sometimes showing temper and being short with people, had also become part of the pattern.

Yesterday he had snapped at a yeoman because she had been two minutes late on duty. Later he had started to bawl out an ensign for some trivial blunder, and halfway through had simply run out of the energy to finish. Leaving an awkward silence behind him on the bridge, he had escaped into the turbolift. He had been glad when the closing doors had allowed him to lean heavily against the wall, unnoticed.

What's wrong with me? he had thought. Then, *Snap out of it!* he had argued with himself. *There's nothing wrong with you. You're young, you're healthy, you've got the best Starship in the fleet at your fingertips, you've got a dedicated crew, good friends and a brilliant future. So what's the matter? What's wrong?*

But telling himself all that hadn't helped. It never did. He had sighed heavily again and gone to his cabin to hide.

This very afternoon he had nearly reached the limit of his tolerance even with Spock and McCoy.

They were disagreeing, as usual, about the way in which an expedition to a new planet should be carried out.

The environment of the planet was hostile, the atmosphere being mostly chlorine, but valuable minerals had shown on the sensors. The Enterprise had been asked to perform a feasibility study of mining on the planet's surface.

Spock felt that a group of scientists should be beamed down to examine the surface at first hand. McCoy was insisting that a shuttlecraft should be used, so that the crew would have an environmental 'haven' if required.

They had brought their plans to Kirk, hoping for a decision. Uncharacteristically, he had told them to go away and sort it out.

After what could only be called a pregnant silence they had left, McCoy casting a slightly puzzled backward glance over his shoulder as he departed.

Bicker, bicker, bicker, thought Kirk as he took several more headache tablets. *They never seem to agree, and they always come to me to sort out their arguments.*

Couldn't they leave him alone? He had enough to deal with. Enough! Too much! Too hard!

Oh god, what's the matter with me? he thought in despair.

He picked up his stylus once more, intending to carry on with his reports, but just couldn't find the energy. Throwing it down again, he slumped over his computer and began to play idly with the keys.

Eyes unfocused, he didn't really look at what the screen was displaying until something caught his attention and he noticed that he was reading the obituary of Raintree, the lieutenant from Security who had died on Omega IV.

Startled, he sat back. Inadvertently he had called up a list of those who had died in service on the Enterprise since the start of the five-year mission.

He watched in horror as the computer screen scrolled the information, giving all the details of the young people who had died so heroically under his care. Oh dear god, under his care! So many of them, such worthy people, gone forever. His responsibility. His fault!

The door chime sounded. He didn't answer it. It sounded again, insistently. He pushed the intercom irritably.

"Who is it?" he asked curtly, trying not to show anything in his voice.

"It's Bones, Jim," said McCoy's voice. "I need to talk to you."

"Just a minute," called Kirk. *Oh no, I can't let him in. He'll see, he'll know I'm losing my grip... Stop it!* he told himself firmly. *Calm down.* But it was all he could do to stand, run his hands through his hair, swallow another pill, straighten his shirt and his desk, and release the door lock.

McCoy came in. Spock was with him.

Act normally, thought Kirk. This will pass. They can't tell, they can't see into your mind.

"Come in, come in," he said, doing his best to be jovial. "Join me for a drink." And when he had seated them with some herb tea, "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

There was a slight hesitation, then McCoy spoke. "It's this damn mission, Jim," he began.

Oh no, thought Kirk, not again. I can't stand any more of this. Please don't let them fight any more.

But McCoy continued, "Jim, I just can't make him see sense," he said, indicating the Vulcan. "We need to send a shuttle. We can pack it with experimental equipment, and I could go down with them in case they need a doctor, and..."

"Captain," Spock interrupted, "the doctor is indulging his desire to explore. Sending the shuttle would be a lengthy process. Two or three people in survival suits can carry out all the necessary tests in a much shorter time. We can arrange for them to be beamed up at the slightest sign of trouble."

"Beam them up!" McCoy spluttered. "And what if something goes wrong with the transporter? What if there's a malfunction? It wouldn't be the first time, you know that. Then they'd be stuck down there with no hope of surviving. Jim, you can't let him do it. It's obvious he doesn't..."

"Stop it!" said Kirk suddenly, banging a fist on the table. "Just... stop it. Both of you."

There was a stunned silence.

Kirk reached out with a trembling hand and straightened his cup in its saucer. He stood up.

"Don't you realise what it does to me when you argue like this?" he said, gulping a breath. "It tears me apart! Don't you see that I agree with *both* of you? Spock, you help me think, you share your logic, you advise me. I value that. Bones, you share your feelings, you make sure that I don't forget I'm dealing with real people, not just spaceships. I appreciate that, too. But you're both my friends. *Both* of you. So don't ask me to constantly take sides, don't ask me to choose between you. I can't do that, so please, just... stop it!"

And with those two final words his voice broke, his hand slashed through the air in a gesture of dismissal, and he turned and walked stiffly and very rapidly from the cabin.

The swoosh of the door closing behind him left a heavy silence. The man was gone, but his presence lingered with them in the room.

Spock and McCoy sat immobile for some time, staring at the door. Finally they looked at each other.

"Now look what you've done!" growled McCoy.

Spock folded his arms and withdrew behind his eyes. "I did not perceive that the Captain was directing his comments at me alone."

McCoy threw his hands up in a gesture of despair. "I'm going after him," he said.

"To rail at him further on the matter of the shuttlecraft, no doubt," Spock observed.

"Oh, come on, Spock, the man's obviously upset. I want to find out what's wrong."

"I agree the Captain seems somewhat distressed," said Spock, "yet his leaving would suggest that he wishes to be alone."

"For heaven's sake!" McCoy cried. "You wouldn't understand, you unfeeling..." An unpleasant word hung in the air for a moment. "...Vulcan!" McCoy finally concluded.

Spock rose to leave. "Doctor," he said, "this conversation is becoming unproductive, and it will not help the Captain. If you feel it is necessary, I shall endeavour to speak to him myself."

McCoy made as if to reply angrily, then quite suddenly he subsided and blocked Spock's route to the door.

At precisely the same moment Spock seemed to hesitate. They gazed at each other in silence.

"We're doing it again, aren't we?" McCoy said.

Spock considered. After a long moment he turned and sat down. "For once, Doctor, I believe you are right," he said.

McCoy resisted the urge to make another cynical comment. It was quiet for a short time, then Spock looked directly at McCoy.

"Doctor, in your opinion, what is the matter with the Captain?" he asked.

The fact that Spock had actually asked McCoy's opinion completely changed the charged atmosphere in the cabin. McCoy was smart enough to recognise an olive branch when it was waved directly under his nose. He shook his head.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but he's obviously very upset. I've been noticing recently that he seems to have been a bit depressed."

Spock nodded. "I am aware of the Human condition," he said, then continued, "is the Captain physically unwell?"

"I don't think so," McCoy replied. "He's had a lot of bumps and bruises lately, and he's tired and working too hard. The scratches that Gorn creature gave him haven't healed very well. In fact, I did another blood test just today, to see if the infection has cleared up." He stopped abruptly, as though something had just occurred to him, which it had. "D'you know," he said in wonder, "with all that's been going on with this chlorine covered planet, I

haven't had time to check the results."

McCoy immediately contacted sickbay on the intercom and asked Nurse Chapel to bring the results of the tests to Kirk's cabin. While they waited, Spock asked another question.

"If there is no physical reason for his mood," he inquired, "then what has caused this?"

McCoy shrugged. "Spock, there are times when the cycle of Human emotions reaches a real low. Sometimes Humans are just struck by a deep feeling of melancholy. It's a normal part of our emotional pattern, and it's nothing to worry about. It's only when it goes on for a long time, or if the effects are very severe, that it needs to be looked at seriously."

Voicing those thoughts, McCoy realised that he had actually registered Kirk's depression on a subliminal level. That was to say, Kirk hadn't exactly been shuffling along the corridors with a dejected stoop, long faced, hugging the walls, or anything; but thinking about it, McCoy realised that he had probably been aware that something was wrong.

Why hadn't he done anything about it before? A simple, 'Is everything okay, Jim?' might have been enough. Kirk's usual fit and healthy bearing had been sadly lacking recently. McCoy began to feel guilty.

"If I understand Human medicine correctly," Spock deliberated, "then these feelings of melancholy you describe would probably be enhanced by tiredness, stress, physical injury or illness."

"Yes," McCoy agreed, "particularly in the event of a combination of some or all of those conditions."

Nurse Chapel arrived with Kirk's file. Placing it in front of McCoy, she obviously sensed that something was going on, so she didn't linger.

McCoy found a result he didn't like straight way. "He's got a blood infection," he said. "The workup shows that it's quite nasty, and it's probably been lingering for some time. It's probably worn him out and made him feel very lethargic. I expect he's been having some cracking headaches, too. Damn! I was sure there was nothing there after he'd finished that last course of treatment. It must have been there all along, but in such small quantities that it didn't show up. I should have checked this earlier."

Spock was not about to allow the doctor to take all the blame. He too had been preoccupied recently. This was inexcusable.

"Doctor," he said, "I work most closely with the Captain, on the bridge and elsewhere. Perhaps I should have noticed the depression he has been experiencing earlier. However, I do not believe that he has previously shown any outward signs of distress."

"Maybe not," said McCoy. "Jim always was good at covering up. Or maybe it's just that we weren't looking. Spock," he continued, abruptly changing the subject, "you do know, don't you, that I don't really mean it when I shout and argue with you? It's just a way of airing views, of thinking aloud."

"I believe I am indeed aware of that," Spock admitted. "Do you

know that the same is also true for me? There are occasions when I suggest a course of action simply because I deduce that you will suggest the exact opposite. It is a valuable way of examining opposing viewpoints."

Why, you little devil! thought McCoy privately, but he said aloud, "Sometimes we argue too much, don't we?"

"It is only too much if it distresses the Captain. Perhaps, Doctor, we should find a way of resolving our differences without involving Jim."

"No." McCoy shook his head. "As he said earlier, he values us. We are his right and left hand men, so to speak. We pull in opposite directions, it's true, but that's what keeps him in the middle."

Spock agreed, but cautioned. "Perhaps in the future, Doctor, we should be careful not to overdo our arguing in his presence. It cannot be easy for him to be always the arbiter in our disputes."

They sat and thought for a while, then finally McCoy said, "I believe we owe Jim an apology."

Spock looked across the table at him. "It would appear," he said quietly, "that neither of us has done a very good job of taking care of our friend recently."

As one, they rose from their seats and went in search of their Captain.

They knew he was not in his cabin because that was where they had just come from, so they went to the bridge, but he hadn't been there.

When they hadn't found him in the gym, the messhall, or on the observation deck, they began to search in earnest.

They searched the gardens in hydroponics, they looked in at McCoy's office in sickbay, in Spock's cabin, in Scott's, and in Uhura's, but he wasn't there.

Crewmembers wandering the ship that night might have been forgiven for smiling as they passed Spock and McCoy pacing side by side, in step, hands behind their backs, like a pair of twins in their Science black and blue.

But the purposeful strides and the looks of determination on their faces would have dispelled any lingering humour and made them realise that the officers' intent was very serious.

At one point they paused by an intercom. Spock half raised a questioning eyebrow, but McCoy shook his head. Without a word being exchanged, they had agreed that paging would be inappropriate in the circumstances. They moved on.

At last they found him in one of the unoccupied guest cabins, the only one which had a porthole. He stood with his back to them, gazing at the stars.

The door closed behind them with a quiet 'thunk'.

Nobody said anything for some time.

Finally, Spock cleared his throat.

Softly, Kirk acknowledged their presence. "Yes, gentlemen, I know you're there."

But he didn't turn to face them.

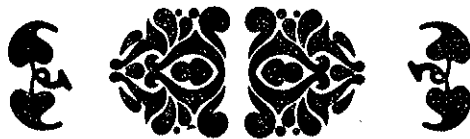
McCoy couldn't contain himself any longer. He crossed the cabin and took his friend firmly by the arm. "Come on, Jim," he said. "We've got some explaining to do."

Spock came up on the other side of him. Together, they walked Kirk to his cabin.

They gave him comfort in the form of a warm drink, something to take away the headache, and an antibiotic. But mostly they just let him talk.

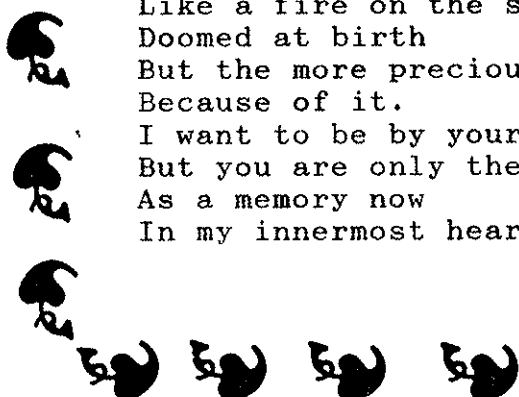
And he did talk, late into the night, until he was quite exhausted. The barriers unleashed, the crisis over, he poured out all his woes; he told them his fears and his doubts; and he let them share his burden.

They stayed with him until he finally fell asleep.



NEVER AGAIN

I want to be by your side,
But you are never there.
A ghost has more substance,
A spectre more presence,
But you are never there
Except as an emptiness
In my innermost heart.
And a memory...
Of strong arms,
Of laughing brown eyes,
Of loneliness shared
For one stolen moment
Of fugitive time;
Of love that was
Like a fire on the snow,
Doomed at birth
But the more precious
Because of it.
I want to be by your side,
But you are only there
As a memory now
In my innermost heart.



Sheryl Peterson

PERENNITY

by

Denise Watkins

It was early spring, and although the day had not lived up to its early expectations it was, nevertheless, a pleasant enough morning.

Dr. Leonard McCoy considered that a walk in Central Park was a very welcome change from the corridors of the Enterprise. He had expected to see more people, but supposed that as the park was adjacent to Starfleet Headquarters most of its potential visitors were still hard at work.

Feeling a certain smug satisfaction because he was off duty, McCoy slowed his pace and let the beauty of his surroundings seep into him. Spock was some way ahead of him, and the doctor could see that his attention had been claimed by an enchanting bank of miniature narcissi. Obviously the Vulcan was in no hurry either.

Spock and McCoy were not usually to be found in one another's company off the ship; their interests were too diverse. However, Captain Kirk had beamed down earlier in order to attend a staff meeting, and before leaving he had arranged to have lunch with his two friends at the Base restaurant.

As neither he nor Spock had any pressing commitments that morning the doctor had suggested to the Vulcan that he might like to accompany him on a visit to the park prior to meeting up with Kirk. He hadn't really expected that his invitation would be accepted, but Spock had been agreeable, explaining that he would welcome the chance to visit the park, which was renowned for its botanical gardens.

Happy in the knowledge that there were no possible dangers or unexpected threats to be found here, McCoy leisurely made his way over to where Spock was standing, and by common consent they walked on together, following a trail which took them deep into a bright thicket of rhododendrons. Suddenly Spock hesitated and halted McCoy by placing his hand on the other's arm.

Puzzled by the Vulcan's attitude, McCoy asked, "What's the matter, Spock?"

"I am not sure, Doctor, but perhaps we should investigate. If you will follow me?" Without explaining further, Spock began to force a path between two clumps of bushes.

After they had pushed their way further in McCoy could hear the sound which the Vulcan had caught earlier, a muffled, heart-rending sobbing.

This time it was McCoy who stopped Spock. "Do you think we ought to intrude?" he asked in a low voice.

"Possibly not, Doctor. However, I do think that we should

unobtrusively check on the circumstances."

"Yes, Spock, I guess you're right," agreed McCoy, realising that it was possible that someone could be hurt and in need of assistance.

Together they moved cautiously forward until they came to the edge of a natural arbour which was completely enclosed save for a narrow track leading out on the opposite side. Huddled disconsolately on a bench was the solitary figure of a young child crying unhappily.

Both men drew back. "Doctor," murmured Spock, "I cannot sense any other presence in the immediate vicinity. Perhaps it would, therefore, be best if you approached the child in order to ascertain the problem. I shall make my way round and wait for you over by the path."

McCoy stood for a moment watching Spock's retreating back, hoping the Vulcan's faith in him was not going to be misplaced. Sighing softly, he turned his attention to the young girl. She couldn't, he thought, be more than seven years old at most, and her dark hair reminded him poignantly of his own daughter at that age. Briefly he pondered the wisdom of encouraging her to speak to strangers. However, she was too young to be here alone, and he couldn't ignore her obvious distress.

Mentally he squared his shoulders and stepped out into the clearing, deliberately rustling the branches to give the child some warning of his approach. Casually he walked over and sat down at the far end of the seat.

"Good morning, young lady," he ventured tentatively. It crossed his mind that she might jump up and run away from him, but that didn't happen. Instead she dragged her arm across her face, making a brave attempt to master her sobbing.

Slowly McCoy drew the child out of her shell. Apparently her name was Victoria. Both her parents were away on a deep space mission, and she attended the Base boarding school situated at the far side of the park.

That afternoon her class was holding a sponsored event in aid of school funds, and it was clear that great prestige was attached to doing well. Sadly, all Victoria's efforts had ended in failure, and her own disappointment, added to the teasing of her classmates, had proved too much, and she had sought refuge in the park.

Long buried feelings of remorse surfaced as McCoy talked to the young girl. During his daughter's childhood he had been so busy helping humanity at large that he had not seen just how badly he was neglecting his own family. When his wife had left, taking Joanna with her, McCoy's first reaction had been a mixture of shock and anger. Later, during the long months before he had joined the Service, he had come to perceive his wife's reasons for going. With that understanding had come guilt and sorrow.

Eventually McCoy had come to realise that no matter how much he regretted his actions no amount of self-reproach would alter the past, and his acceptance of that fact brought him a measure of peace and fortitude with which to face the future. However, there was no escaping his overwhelming and ineffable sense of loss which, over the years, wove itself into the fabric of his being.

Shaking off his reminiscence, Dr. McCoy gently took the crumpled sheet of paper from Victoria's hands. He knew though that any attempts he made would be no more successful than the child's. Yet, still haunted by his memories, he desperately wanted to be able to help.

If only, he thought, Scotty was here! He would be able to bring a smile to Victoria's face in minutes. Jim, even, might have been able to help. But Spock...

Maybe, though, he considered, Spock could help. From chance remarks the Vulcan had let slip over the years, as well as one or two observations Amanda had made on the few occasions he had met her, McCoy was aware that Spock hadn't been a *completely* serious Vulcan child.

He smiled at Victoria. "I think I know just the person who can help us," he told her optimistically. Raising his voice he called, "Spock, would you come over here, please?"

When the Vulcan had joined them McCoy succinctly outlined the position, and as the crux of the matter became clear Spock vividly recollected an incident which had occurred in his youth.

They had been on a trip to the city in the family aircar and on their return Spock had enquired as to how the craft was able to fly. Pleased by his interest, Sarek had taken him into the study and had used the computer to demonstrate the principles of flight.

They had been discussing the merits of different types of aircraft when his mother had announced the arrival of a visitor. Left alone, Spock had studied the computer for a further ten minutes before becoming restless. On looking round he had seen a stack of computer paper on the desk, and had been unable to resist the urge to experiment.

At his fourth attempt he had been successful. Unfortunately his father had chosen that precise moment to return, and Spock could clearly remember his startled expression.

Spock also recalled his own apprehension. Previous experience had taught him that any action of his which caused such an open response was likely to have grave consequences.

While he was still trying to think of a suitable explanation his mother had come into the room. Taking in the situation she had chuckled openly. Then, seeing the frown gathering on Sarek's face, she had told him quite firmly that he should be glad Spock had absorbed the lesson so well - as was evident from the fact that he had obviously had no difficulty in putting the theory into practice.

He hadn't, Spock mused, on that particular occasion received his father's usual lecture on the sins of frivolity.

He was brought back to the present by Dr. McCoy's voice demanding, "Well, can you do it, Spock?"

Glancing at the limp and creased sheet of paper in the doctor's hands Spock replied, "Not without materials."

"That's no problem."

McCoy went over to a rubbish bin and pulled out a news sheet. Seeing Spock's doubtful look he cajoled, "Come on, Spock. It's clean enough, and it won't matter what it's made out of. If you're quick Victoria will be able to get back to school before she's missed."

Spock accepted the thick news sheet, silently acknowledging that Dr. McCoy's offering was eminently more suitable than Victoria's piece of paper.

As he spread it out on the bench Spock hesitated momentarily. In the past he would have helped reluctantly, knowing that the doctor would undoubtedly tease him over the matter at some inappropriate time. However, over the years friendship had grown between them. Although McCoy was still prone to making outrageous comments Spock could now hear, and accept, the affection hidden behind them; and as he now looked at the two hopeful faces and felt the doctor's empathy with the child he was glad he could be of assistance, and that neither McCoy nor the child would be disappointed.

Neatly he tore the sheet to a suitable size and set to work. It took him less than two minutes to complete the task, and with due solemnity he presented his creation to the child. She rewarded him with a radiant smile, and listened intently as he explained how to achieve the best results.

Then, encouraged by Dr. McCoy, Victoria carefully followed his instructions, and to the joy of all three, the paper aeroplane soared gracefully across the clearing.



There is an emptiness in me
I cannot fill,
An aching wound
No-one will ever heal,
A need so desperate
There are no words
To possibly explain
Just what I feel.

The rank I dared to hope for,
Mine at last!
I gave up all I loved,
And sold my soul!
Now the empty years before me
Stretch away
Like a desert waste
Whose sands no man can hold.

Sheryl Peterson

IF TOMORROW WOULD BE REALLY YESTERDAY

by

Manuela Reitano

In the briefing room Kirk half listened to what his First Officer was saying. His mind was elsewhere, considering the most difficult problem he had ever faced in his whole career. While the Enterprise was orbiting the Earth of the late 20th century for historical research, a transporter malfunction and an erroneous setting of coordinates had been responsible for the beaming up of an unwilling passenger.

"... and so the fact itself is completely unexplainable," Spock ended his report to the Captain.

"Yes," answered Kirk, who had practically no idea what Spock had been talking about. "But that remains your problem, Mr. Spock." He stood, and began pacing the room. "Do you have any idea what *my* job is? I have to tell her she's on board a Starship from the future, that there's almost no chance she can see her Earth again, and that for the rest of her life she'll have to live among strangers in a world she may never even begin to comprehend..." Kirk tailed off the words, as though he was afraid to continue.

Spock stood in the room, his hands clasped behind his back, silent. Kirk stared at nothing on the wall before him, then turned to face his First Officer.

"With John Christopher it was all different, somehow. He was a military man, accustomed to the unknown and its dangers - and after all we were able to send him back to Earth." Kirk pushed the button on the intercom, calling sickbay.

"McCoy here," came the familiar voice.

"Bones," Kirk began, "how's the girl? Has she woken up?"

"Not yet. But it won't be long, Jim. And?"

"Spock's run all possible checks with the computer. We need repairs badly, and we can't send her back. I can't risk ship and crew on another time journey. In our present condition it would mean the destruction of both the vessel and our lives."

There was no answer from the other end, but it wasn't necessary. Kirk went on, "As soon as she wakes up, take her to my cabin. I... I'll talk to her. Kirk out."

James Kirk felt the full weight of the captaincy falling on his shoulders. These were the moments when he wished that someone else was the decision maker. It was strange how he always just managed to handle the most difficult problems.

"Spock, I'll be in my quarters if you need me. You have the con."

Spock silently watched the Captain as he headed for the lift.

He collected the computer tapes scattered on the table, then headed for the bridge.

Decks below, in sickbay, the girl was slowly coming to. Snatches of memory crossed her mind, playing again the moments just before she lost consciousness to McCoy's hypo. The image of a large room ebbed and flowed slowly, until reality became more consistent, but confused, as if out of focus. She tried to get up, and a firm but gentle hand restrained her, pushing her down.

"Not so fast, or the room will start revolving around you," said a voice at her side.

She obediently lay back, closed her eyes, then opened them again. It was a little better. She looked around without moving her head, and saw a large room, well ordered and lighted. There were other beds around, and each one had a sort of shelf with what looked like a TV set. The room resembled nothing she had seen in her life, but somehow the surroundings held a strong sense of déjà vu... It was familiar, and yet unfamiliar. Then she looked up at the man who was standing near her bed. He smiled.

"Where... where am I?" she asked.

"Take it easy, and try not to worry. You're among friends. Don't be afraid," the man answered reassuringly.

"But where am I?" she insisted. "What is this place? What happened?" She tried again to get up, and this time McCoy didn't restrain her.

"You are in a sickbay ward, Elizabeth. But don't worry - there's nothing wrong with you. I..."

"Sickbay? What sickbay? I'm not ill! What am I doing here? Who are you?"

"Elizabeth, listen to me..."

"No! What am I doing here, and who are you?"

"There's nothing to fear. I'm a friend." As much as McCoy wanted to sound reassuring, his words seemed to have the opposite effect. He could clearly see the fear creeping into the girl's blue eyes.

"I'm here to help you, Elizabeth. My name is Leonard McCoy. I'm a doctor."

"A doctor?" she repeated. Her brain was working much better now, and the man did not look like a doctor, as he claimed to be - certainly not like the doctors she knew. Everything in the man suggested sympathy and friendliness, but the thought of having been kidnapped for god knew what reasons, or of having fallen into a white slavery ring, persisted in her mind. She threw off the light cover and got off the bed. McCoy did nothing.

"What do you want from me? Why did you bring me here?" Her voice was now filled with terror. As McCoy approached her she backed away. "No, please - let me go," she pleaded.

"No-one is here to hurt you. Believe me, and trust me," said McCoy.

She looked closely at the man. Could she really trust him? The look in his blue eyes was very fatherly. He wore a pair of black trousers and a blue shirt with a strange insignia on it. She knew she had already seen a similar costume... but where? She looked around again. Yes, the room was very much like... No, that couldn't be! But the room looked very like the Enterprise sickbay, and the man bore an incredible resemblance to that ship's Chief Medical Officer... Suddenly everything seemed to have a meaning, a logical and yet an illogical meaning. She was on board the Enterprise.

It can't be true, she said to herself. The Enterprise does not exist. It's fiction - it's a TV show. If you think this is the real thing, then you really DO need a doctor, no matter how he's dressed!

The doctor saw the puzzled look on her face and approached her. "Listen to me, Elizabeth. I know you are confused, terrified. And I know you have a lot of questions. But I'm not allowed to answer all of them. Captain Kirk will be able to explain everything to you," he said, smiling and extending his hand. "Please come with me."

Elizabeth hesitated a bit, then she followed him. "Yes, I guess I do deserve an explanation for all this."

McCoy sighed his half relief. After the first moments of understandable panic, at least he had got the girl to trust him, and to be no longer hostile to him. Considering what she was about to face, that was a good start, if one could see anything good in the whole matter.

McCoy steered her out of sickbay, through the ship's corridors. He really would not have liked to be in the Captain's shoes at that moment. He remembered, too, how Captain Christopher had felt when he was given the news that he had to remain on the ship and never see his family again. But as a doctor and a psychologist, perhaps he had the most difficult task once the Captain had revealed to her that she was a prisoner in the 23rd century.

On the way to the Captain's quarters neither of them spoke. Elizabeth's mind was in a real turmoil as several feelings interlocked. Excitement, because everything was just like all the photos she had seen, just like the videos she had watched so many times, over and over. Every detail, even the tiniest, was as she had always imagined it to be. The doors of the turbolift swooshed closed behind her, and experiencing it for real gave her a thrill along her spine.

And joy. This was her greatest dream come true. How many times had she found herself wondering, *What if...?* How many times had she pictured herself on board the Enterprise as one of the officers?

But she couldn't help being also frightened and apprehensive. What was she doing on board the real Enterprise? And how had she come on board?

McCoy shook her gently, interrupting her reverie. Again the lift's doors swooshed open, and a long corridor stretched before

them. She followed McCoy through what looked to her like a maze, until they reached a door. On a plate on the wall there was the name of the owner of the cabin, along with series of numbers that made no sense to her, but obviously they referred to a coded identification. McCoy pressed the door bell.

"Come in," said a voice inside the cabin, filtered but nonetheless unmistakably familiar. The door opened, and Elizabeth froze. The man she was looking at had the same wonderful hazel eyes, the same expression she would recognise in a billion, the same shocking smile...

Captain James Tiberius Kirk was standing a few inches from her, offering his hand and smiling the best smile she had ever seen on that face. She tried to conceal her bewilderment, joy and embarrassment, wishing she had only half of Spock's capacity to conceal emotions. Hadn't she always wanted to meet him? *Be careful what you wish for - you may get it.* And boy, was she getting it!

"My name is James Kirk," the Captain said. "Please, Miss Jones, come in. I have something to tell you, and... it's quite important."

He purposely avoided mentioning his rank, and the fact that they were on a Starfleet vessel. That could come later. He gestured to the girl to come forward and take a seat. McCoy followed her in, standing beside the chair where Elizabeth was seated.

Kirk took his place at the other side of the desk, and for a moment he said nothing. Then he began slowly, looking for the right words, as though he could buy some time to delay... Delay what? He did not know, except that he didn't like what he was about to do and say. But he had no choice - none of them had. Kirk looked up to McCoy for a moment, then diverted his gaze to the girl.

"Elizabeth," - like McCoy he switched to a first name basis, hoping that it would somehow ease things - "Elizabeth, what I have to tell you is not pleasant, and believe me, this is very painful for me, more than you can imagine." He took a deep breath. "We - myself and Dr. McCoy - and all the other people you will meet... we are from the future. You are here because of an instrument failure, and you'll have to stay here for a little while before we can return you to Earth," he lied. He wondered if it was to himself or to the girl. Maybe to both. "We are doing all we can to return to 20th century Earth. Our engines are badly damaged, and we need time to repair them. I'm sure it won't take long - the nearest base is only three days from here."

Elizabeth was looking at him, holding his gaze with a certain difficulty. She wiped her sweating hands on her trousers.

Kirk went on, "You are on board a Starship, the USS Enterprise. We are from the United Federation of Planets, an organisation very similar to your United States of America, that includes not only Earth but many other planets, even outside our - your - solar system."

As Kirk spoke, explaining what the situation was, reassuring her, he kept studying the girl's reactions. She looked quite calm despite what she had been told, but maybe the words had yet to sink in, and she hadn't fully realised what had happened, and the meaning behind Kirk's speech.

On the contrary, Elizabeth had realised very well what the Captain had been saying; she had guessed almost everything. This was exactly what she had been asking for, the only difference being that this was no game at all.

"... this is only a temporary problem, but at the moment we are unable to send you back." Kirk smiled reassuringly at the girl.

"You mean I can't go back?" she asked. "Yes, but if you can't..." Now she was confused; her dream had turned into a nightmare.

"No," said Kirk, "we'll be able to go back. It will take some time - some weeks..."

Sooner or later he would have to tell her the truth: there was no way back. But it was better to tell her a little at a time. He didn't think it would ease things for her, but nevertheless, this was the best he could do. There was no way he could make her accept the fact that she wouldn't be able to see her family again; he could only try to make things a little emotionally bearable.

"But what if...? With John Christopher you were able to send him back, and the..." Too late she realised what she had just said.

The smile on Captain Kirk's face faded abruptly. He looked at her in disbelief. "How... how do you know that?" he asked. "Bones, what have you told her?"

"I haven't told her anything, Jim."

Kirk rested his eyes on Elizabeth. He was very serious now, the military man replacing the handsome Captain. He repeated the question slowly.

"How do you know about Captain Christopher? That fact is classified in the ship's log, and it's very unlikely you could have had access to it, even if you could figure out how to use the sickbay computer."

Two pairs of eyes were focused on her. Of course, she was able to explain how she knew about Captain Christopher, even if the truth seemed more unbelievable than a lie. She wondered if they *would* believe her, or instead would confine her in an asylum. In any case, it was the only explanation she had and could give them. Elizabeth looked first at Kirk, then at McCoy.

"Well, I have a way of explaining all this, and... I know it will sound a little strange to you, and I hope you'll believe me. I think you're familiar with 20th century Earth culture..."

James Tiberius Kirk listened attentively. He certainly had not expected anything like this. Bewilderment, incredulity, curiosity, and a certain worry crossed his face as Elizabeth Jones, unexpected passenger on the USS Enterprise, told her story about a 20th century television show called STAR TREK. The situation was somehow reversed, and it was Kirk who was receiving a shock.

Elizabeth mentioned some of the... stories?... she knew: when they had had a shipload of furry little hungry tribbles; their encounter with that crazy but nice gang boss on Iotia. Remembering those incidents, Kirk could not suppress a little laughter.

"You know, in all this there's one funny side. I'm with a person who seems to know a great deal about me, while to me she's a perfect stranger." He seemed thoughtful for a moment, as though recalling himself in another reality - yes, Edith, when he wished he could tell her of the future he knew, when he wished he could save her.

He went on, "Well, that's quite an interesting story. That's the first time such a thing has happened to me." He looked at McCoy, who had kept silent all the time. "But you'll understand that I can't take your story for granted. My First Officer will have to run a check on what you've told us. Elizabeth, you certainly realise that it's not an easy matter. I've never faced such a problem before in my career, and I think that not even Starfleet has. You are now in a very different position from the one Captain Christopher was in. We are primarily a military institution, and our first concern is security. Some subjects are strictly classified material. You'll understand that you are no more than an ordinary guest."

"Yes, I know that, Captain," said Elizabeth.

"Well," said Kirk, who wanted nothing more than to have a long discussion with his Chief Medical Officer and Mr. Spock on the subject at hand, "I guess it's been a very tough day for everyone involved. You'd better get some rest, and tomorrow we'll examine our problem and try to find a solution to it. We have our guest quarters empty; I hope you'll find them comfortable, and," he added, trying to lighten the atmosphere, "up to what you know about the ship's quarters." Then he pressed the intercom button, calling Security.

"Yes, I'm sure it'll look like the ones I know, Captain."

A Security guard appeared at the door, a phaser attached to his belt.

"Johnson," said the Captain, "please escort our guest to quarters on deck 6." He led the girl to the door. "Take good care of her, Johnson, and issue a Code Two Security Order."

McCoy looked at Kirk, started to say something, then stopped. Kirk knew what he was doing. But he couldn't help wondering if the girl already knew what was going to happen.

As Elizabeth left with the Security guard Kirk gestured to McCoy to remain with him. The doctor sat down on the chair.

"Why issue a Security Two order? She can't do anything!" he snapped.

"Bones, I do not want her loose on my ship! I don't know what I'm going to do, but for the moment I want her under surveillance - at least until we set this thing straight." He sat down, rubbing his eyes with the palms of his hands. "Bones, what's your opinion?" he asked.

"Well, I really don't know, Jim. The whole thing is absurd, but she wasn't playing make-believe. And I'm as shocked as you are right now! What worries me most is the kind of information she may possibly know, and I'm not a military man."

"Yes, that's the problem, that she may possibly know even

classified material, and not only personal matters. While she was talking I felt naked, naked to my very soul, and I've never felt like that before. She must know everything about me..." He tailed off the words, remaining silent and thoughtful for several minutes. This 'everything' could possibly include his personal life, and even more intimate details, things he had never told to anyone, not even his family or closest friends. He shivered at the thought.

"Damn!" he said aloud, slamming his fist on the table. "I have duties to the Federation and Starfleet, and Federation security is my concern. She might be a possible danger to the Federation. I'll have to notify headquarters of the incident, then it'll be up to them to decide what to do." But he didn't like the idea at all. It was not the girl's fault, and he couldn't simply wash the problem away. There had to be something he could do - but what?

"Bones?"

McCoy was lost in his own train of thought. "Maybe... maybe Spock can somehow erase her memory and thus block out all her knowledge of us," he suggested hopefully. "It wouldn't solve the problem completely, but..."

Kirk weighed the suggestion. "Yes, perhaps it can be done. We would still have an unwilling passenger on board, and all that follows it, but we can handle that. Yes, that could be the best piece of advice you've ever given me. It could be the best solution for everyone concerned, even if she'll have to remain here nonetheless. But first things first." He resolutely pushed the intercom button.

"Bridge," he said.

"Spock here, Captain."

"Mr. Spock, would you please come to my quarters. It seems that our problem has become more complicated than we thought it to be. Kirk out."

McCoy eyed Kirk. "Perhaps this is the right time for Spock to have a little emotional display, don't you think?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't bet on that, Bones."

In the meantime the Security Officer ushered Elizabeth to her cabin. She realised that Security people were not friendly - the man only said a couple of words, and left her in the quiet cabin going over the events of the past few hours. She suspected that Security Order Two had something to do with her; she knew that James Kirk was not a man who took foolish chances, and she could hardly blame him - she'd have done the same. Surely Johnson had remained outside the cabin.

She looked around with curiosity. The cabin was exactly like they were in the TV show, only larger. A door on the left wall opened into a small cubicle, and almost laughing she discovered that there were indeed toilets on board, only they were never seen in the show.

Too much had happened too fast. She thought of all the times she had pictured herself as an officer on the Enterprise, all the

times she had dreamed of a possible romance between herself and Captain Kirk. But now the truth was different; this was reality, not fantasy, and in this reality she was a stranger among strangers, although she felt at home.

Home... Strange, how she had thought so little about her home back on Earth. Certainly they were all looking for her by now, desperation creeping into her parents's eyes as hours passed and no good news arrived. Tears began to fill her eyes, and she dropped onto the bed, crying silently. What would her life be from now on? What could she possibly do in the 23rd century?

All the elements fitted into a reality far more complicated than she could have imagined. James Kirk was a real Captain, with real duties, who really risked his life in the line of duty; he was not just an actor earning his cheque. What *she* knew to be only a work of fiction was instead life - and sometimes death - for these men. And if so, if Kirk really knew about John Christopher, then everything else had happened or would happen for real. Kirk had really suffered the loss of Edith Keeler that night in New York City; and Miramanee... she remembered very well Kirk's expression, full of grief and pain. Khan and the Botany Bay... and an error that would lead to tragedy...

She knew these people so well that she could have told exactly what Kirk's thoughts were in a given moment, maybe because she had always considered Kirk and Spock and McCoy as her friends. But was this her right, to know such intimate details of another person's life? The look on Kirk's face had clearly said, *How much of my life can I still consider as mine?* It almost sounded like an accusation.

Having such a knowledge of future events, she could easily change history, change the lives of her friends and spare Kirk the agony of witnessing Spock's death, the tragedy of losing his son and his ship. But would the Prime Directive also apply to her, a Star Trek fan?

She had been staring at the ceiling, and must have fallen asleep, because a sound roused her from her reverie and brought her back to reality. A red light was flashing over the door.

"Red alert! Red alert! All decks go to red alert! This is not a drill! Man your battle stations!"

And this time there was no background music, no commercial break. She was in the midst of a real battle. Klingons? Romulans? or what? Whatever it was, it was happening for real...

The alarm clock rang until she woke up. She needed a couple of minutes to realise that she was in her own room and sleeping in her own bed. Automatically she put out a hand to stop the clock. A familiar face smiled at her from the opposite wall, and near the bed her favourite policeman had his gun pointed at some unseen crook.

Hugging her pillow tightly, she relished the memories of her dream - or had it been a nightmare? - that were still so vivid in her mind.

It would be so wonderful to be on the Enterprise, she thought. Or maybe being Hooker's partner in a black and white for a little while... Yes, that would be an intriguing idea...



ACHILLES HEEL

by

Teresa Abbott

(with thanks to my sister Krysia for the suggestion)

*How terrible the hunger! All powerful and all consuming!
Driving it on, against its will, to seek new prey.*

*And having found its food source, how deep the sorrow, as it
realised that once again its feeding was its host's destruction.*

Dr. McCoy pressed down the intercom switch with a hand that wasn't quite steady. "Captain, I need to see you in sickbay immediately. It's urgent." He added the final two words to forestall the inevitable argument, knowing that Kirk would not want to leave the bridge at this time.

McCoy wasn't to know it, but it was his tone of voice rather than the words he used which caused Kirk's immediate compliance.

"I'll be right down." Even through the speaker, the curiosity was evident in the Captain's voice.

McCoy released the switch, and turned back reluctantly to the patient on the diagnostic couch. Lt. Evans was young, intelligent and ambitious, with everything to live for. But for the last two hours the Doctor had watched him writhing in agony, as though fighting some unknown disease, and nothing the Doctor or his staff could do had any effect. Now the young man lay quiet, vacant eyes staring at the ceiling, his brain waves feeble and erratic although his body was apparently healthy.

Watching him, McCoy knew once again the hopeless despair that always seized him whenever he realised he would be unable to help a patient.

Kirk came through the door barely seconds later, and stopped short as he saw the patient and sensed the atmosphere in sickbay. He made a conscious effort to control the impatience in his voice.

"What's the matter with him?"

To the casual observer, Evans did not look ill, merely sedated, and the Captain could see no immediate reason for the Doctor's urgent summons.

McCoy sighed. "He collapsed on duty a couple of hours ago. I couldn't - and still can't - find any reason for his condition. For the last two hours he's been fighting something - some disease, maybe, or a virus, which has caused him great pain and resulted in an almost catatonic mental state.

"I can't find any trace of any known disease organisms, there are no records of any unusual events in the Lieutenant's recent life

that could have brought him into contact with anything abnormal, but - " and here McCoy's voice cracked - "I don't think he's ever going to recover."

The Captain was taken aback by this last statement. He had assumed all along that the Lieutenant would eventually get better. He realised at once the implications of an unknown disease on the ship, but there was something else worrying him.

"Two hours, you say?"

It was about two hours since the Enterprise had first passed into a strange, diffuse mist that drifted unexplained through this region of space. It was apparently inanimate, but was proving difficult to analyse, and all stations were on full alert.

Spock was studying all the sensor readouts with a team of scientists, but so far had been unable to provide an explanation for the apparently harmless phenomenon.

The unexplained collapse of one of the crew at the time of first contact seemed too much of a coincidence. Kirk made a decision.

"I'll have to get back to the bridge. I'll send Spock down here to have a look at Evans, and to give you a hand with the test results." He turned to leave sickbay, then hesitated, sensing his friend's distress. "Bones, don't blame yourself. You can't be expected to cope with all the unexpected."

But the Doctor had already returned to his patient, and didn't answer him.

Twelve hours later, two more members of the crew had succumbed to the unknown disease, and McCoy began to despair. Always before, when something like this had happened, there had been some clues to work on. This time all their investigations had drawn a complete blank.

Ensign Martin had collapsed in engineering barely an hour after McCoy had spoken to the Captain. The Doctor had watched helplessly as the young Ensign passed through the same stages as the first victim had done. The medical staff had tried drugs, sedation, pain relievers; nothing had any effect, and now there were two patients in sickbay who could only be diagnosed as mentally disabled.

The third victim, a young girl from the support staff this time, was found slumped in her quarters by her room-mate. There was nothing to link the three cases, no common background or event to explain the incidents.

Now the three victims were all in isolation, their contacts had been quarantined and stringent precautions taken to prevent the spread of the complaint. Everyone was very aware, however, that in a confined area such as the Enterprise, the spread of some unknown organism could be overwhelmingly rapid.

Spock made his way to the Captain's quarters, deep in thought. He did not believe in coincidence, and logically the ship's passage

through the unknown mist had to have a bearing on the situation.

The Enterprise had long ago left the unexplained phenomenon behind. Requests to Starfleet asking permission to stay and study the area in more depth had met with absolute refusal.

The ship had a deadline to meet. Important mission, etc, etc. And there was, after all, no concrete evidence to account for the senior officers' unease.

Sensors had detected only inanimate matter, drifting through space. Nothing appeared to have passed through their deflector shields. Spock knew only too well, however, how many varied shapes new life forms could take, and the fact that nothing had been detected did not mean that there wasn't anything there. The start of the crew collapses at exactly the time of initial contact was highly suspicious.

Spock found Kirk at his desk, wearily checking through the sensor records of their passage through the cloud yet again. The desk was covered with discarded coffee cups, and Spock knew at a glance that Kirk had not slept since the start of the emergency - but accepted also that commenting on the fact would only anger his friend.

"Spock, come in."

The welcome was there, as always, in Kirk's voice, even if this time it was veiled in fatigue.

The Vulcan sat down opposite the Captain, and Kirk grimaced.

"Don't say it!"

Spock allowed himself a smile. "We both know there is no need for me to say anything. Your appearance speaks for itself!"

From anyone else, such a comment would have rankled. As it was, Kirk only smiled ruefully in response. Then he quickly became serious.

"Any progress on the disease? Any clues as to where it's come from?"

Outwardly the Vulcan remained expressionless, but Kirk could see the deep concern in the dark eyes.

"Unfortunately not. There is no trace of anything unusual in the systems of any of the victims, and sensor reports from the mist we passed through have shown nothing unexpected."

The Captain leaned back and considered his friend. There was one other course of action they hadn't tried, but he was reluctant to suggest it, afraid as always of exposing Spock to an unknown risk.

Even as he hesitated, the Vulcan guessed his thoughts and spoke quickly to spare his Captain any embarrassment.

"Jim, I feel it would be beneficial if I attempted to mind meld with one of the victims. From all visible appearances the disease has now passed from their bodies, but the Doctor is unable to diagnose what is wrong with their minds. I may be able to ascertain

what the problem is."

Kirk sighed. "Am I so transparent? I appreciate your saving me the task of asking you." Again he hesitated, hating yet again the continual weighing up of necessity and duty against Spock's well-being. Then, impatient with himself, he stood. "All right. I agree it's the only thing we haven't tried. Only... Please, Spock, go carefully. The first sign of any danger and you must pull out."

Nodding his understanding of Kirk's fears, the Vulcan followed the Captain from the room.

McCoy was not so easily convinced.

"Are you mad? Do you know what you're suggesting? Spock, if this disease, or whatever it is, spreads to you, it could destroy your mind as well. Jim, tell him!" The Doctor turned to the Captain for support, and saw at once that he had lost the argument. "I see. You're behind him in this. Well, I only hope the two of you know what you're doing."

White-faced with anger caused - though he would never admit it openly - by concern for Spock, McCoy led the way into the isolation room in which Evans lay, still silent and unresponsive.

Spock sat on the chair next to the bed and studied the patient. He glanced up at Kirk, intending to suggest that the Captain and McCoy leave the two of them alone, but, seeing the expression on his friend's face, realised the futility of such a request. Without further delay he cleared his mind, and, finding the nerve centres on the Lieutenant's face initiated the contact.

A minute later he withdrew in astonishment.

Kirk was at his side, waiting. "Spock, are you all right?"

The Vulcan took a deep breath, and nodded his assurance to his friend. "I am well. But Jim - it is not a disease we are fighting here. There is an alien entity aboard the ship; it has caused this."

Kirk and McCoy stared at him in horror, neither of them thinking for a second of doubting the Vulcan's statement.

"What do you mean? Is it in their minds? Did you communicate with it?" The Captain was clearly worried.

Spock shook his head. "The entity is no longer in the Lieutenant's mind - nor, I believe, is it in the minds of the other victims. Evans retains a memory of having been... visited... by some unknown being, which in some way consumed his mental energy in an attempt to exchange knowledge and information. The alien has now left his mind, and I presume is still somewhere on the ship."

Kirk was across the room and snapping on the intercom before Spock had finished speaking.

"Intruder alert, all stations! There is an alien entity aboard this ship. I want full sensor scans of the entire vessel, with reports of any unusual variations, however slight, in the results."

The Vulcan met his eyes across the room, and had it not been for the seriousness of the situation, Kirk would have sworn that there was a glint of amusement in them.

"Jim, I do not think our sensors will detect anything. Whatever this thing is, it has obviously passed through our deflector screens into the ship, and must therefore exist in some way that is unknown to us."

The Captain looked at Evans. "You're sure it's no longer in his brain? Then why is he still in this state?"

Spock considered. "Physically, he has not suffered any damage. I can only surmise that his mind couldn't cope with such an invasion, and has reacted by total withdrawal. There may be a chance that some of the Vulcan healers will be able to help him."

McCoy looked hopeful for the first time in hours. "At least we know that there's no longer any need for isolation procedures. But how are we going to stop this thing? If our sensors can't detect it, it could attack any one of us at any time."

Spock stood up. "Indeed, Doctor, the Human mind seems particularly vulnerable, being unshielded. Captain, may I suggest..." He faltered, a momentary confusion in the depths of his eyes that only Kirk would notice.

"Spock?" The Captain was curious about the break in his First Officer's concentration. Then, more sharply, "Spock!"

But the Vulcan was already shaking his head, the dark eyes clear again. "It is nothing, Jim. A transient sensation. For a second or two it seemed as if....."

The bleeping of the intercom distracted them from the moment. Later, they were both to remember it.

McCoy snapped down the switch. "Yes?"

"Medical Emergency, Doctor. We have another patient." Nurse Chapel's voice sounded agitated even through the speaker.

The three of them could only stand and look at each other in dismay.

The creature was intrigued. These Human minds were so weak, so fragile, so almost unworthy of consumption. Had it not been so desperate, it would have left them alone out of pity. Yet in each of their memories they carried the knowledge of another, stronger mind, one that would prove worthy of the contact.

But there was a problem. This mind was shielded and impenetrable. An attempt to gain entry had met with immediate, instinctive repulsion. Frustrated, the creature searched the knowledge it had acquired from its victims, anxious for a solution.

Even a strong mind must have a weakness. Some reason for which it could be persuaded to drop its shields...

Spock withdrew his mind from that of the latest victim, and looked up to find the Captain and McCoy eagerly awaiting his report.

Uncharacteristically, he hesitated.

Kirk, reading his friend, indicated with his eyes for McCoy to leave the room, and the Doctor quietly went out.

"Spock, what's the matter?" He could sense the anxiety emanating from the Vulcan.

Spock made no attempt to hide his concern. "Jim, this... creature... is learning fast. It appears to have discovered the hierarchy of power on this ship, and from what I can read in the victim's mind, has selected you as its next victim."

"I see." Kirk's concern was instantly for his ship and how it would be affected without its Captain, rather than for himself.

The Vulcan's concern was more immediate. "Jim, it is illogical that you should expose yourself to this risk. Let me link my mind to yours, so that in the event of any danger, I would know. My mind may be able to drive off the alien before it can do any permanent damage."

Kirk considered the suggestion. Rejected it.

"No. That would put us both at risk. There's no guarantee that you could cope with this thing, and then the crew would be without its Captain and its First Officer."

Spock stood and spoke calmly, but Kirk felt the suppressed anger in his friend. "Jim, that is illogical. We know that you are its next intended victim, and that if you are unprotected, it will in all probability destroy you. You have a duty to the ship to accept my help."

But the Captain was stubborn. "Logically you may be right, but instinct prevents me from risking us both. I'm sorry, Spock, but the answer is still no."

The Vulcan watched his friend leave the sickbay with dismay. When Kirk had gone, he closed his eyes, and clearing his mind, focused on the awareness of Kirk that was always with him. A full linking would have increased that awareness, made it more useful, but what there was was better than nothing.

He hoped fervently that it would be enough.

The creature pulsed forward.

At last it had found the mind it wanted. In itself this mind was also uninteresting, but hopefully it would lead it to that which it really sought. It regretted the inevitable pain it would cause, but could see no alternative.

Filled with anticipation, it began its attack.

To Kirk, sitting at his desk, it felt at first as though

someone had squeezed a sponge full of cold water inside his brain.

Not unpleasant at first, the coldness seemed to trickle through his mind, and had he not been expecting an attack, he might even have sat and savoured the sensation.

As it was, he felt the panic seize him as he fought to hold on to his own consciousness, and managing to get up, he stumbled over to the intercom, intending to summon Spock.

But as he reached for the switch, for a second or two he became one with the creature, and knew then what drove it, and why it had selected him as its victim.

Despite pressure from the alien to the contrary, he held back from activating the switch, and as the coldness turned to pain, fell powerless and in agony to the floor.

With all of his mental strength he fought to keep the knowledge of what was happening to himself, and not to broadcast it to the Vulcan, grateful even in his pain that he had trusted to instinct and forbidden a proper link.

As he finally lost consciousness, how could he have known that his subconscious had betrayed him, and had sent out a silent scream.

On the bridge, Sulu exchanged a worried glance with the other members of the crew. He had asked Mr. Spock for the course correction three times, and on each occasion there had been no response.

The Vulcan sat in the command chair, his hands steepled before him and his eyes closed, and was apparently oblivious of his surroundings.

Hesitantly, Sulu got up and approached the command chair, and tentatively touched the Vulcan on the arm.

"Mr. Spock?"

Spock's eyes jerked open and he stared at the Helmsman, trying without success to conceal his dismay. It was unforgivable that he should have let his attention wander whilst in command.

His concern for the Captain was increasing. The link with Kirk seemed to be growing ever more tenuous, more difficult to keep track of. It was almost as if Jim himself were trying to shield his thoughts from the Vulcan. But why would Jim do that, unless...

"Sulu, take over!"

Spock was out of the command chair and heading for the turbolift, berating himself for being such a fool. There *could* only be one reason why Kirk was attempting to shield his thoughts so strongly.

"Uhura - warn Dr. McCoy that the Captain is in danger!"

As the lift doors closed behind him, he gasped as a wave of pain washed over him. Realising at once that Kirk must have reached a point where he could no longer consciously control his reactions,

Spock prayed that he would not be too late. As the machine sped downwards, his thoughts were filled with the memory of the blank, empty minds of the other victims.

"Lt. Uhura to Dr. McCoy. This is an emergency. Mr. Spock has just left the bridge in an unusually agitated state. He seemed to believe that the Captain was in danger, and I believe he is heading for the Captain's quarters."

McCoy acknowledged the message, and cursing under his breath, left the sickbay at a run. The corridors seemed endless, but the adrenalin activated by fear gave him speed, and he arrived at Kirk's cabin in time to see the Vulcan enter the room ahead of him.

Going through the doorway, the Doctor saw Spock drop instantly to Kirk's side, his hands already reaching for the nerve centres on his friend's sweat-drenched face.

Kirk's body stiffened at the contact, and McCoy hovered anxiously over them, unwilling to touch either of them for fear of jeopardising Spock's efforts.

He expected events to follow the same path as they had done the last few times the Vulcan had melded with a victim. Much to his horror, however, Spock moaned softly to himself, and releasing his hold on Kirk, slumped back against the Captain's bed, where he remained motionless, his face contorted in agony. Anxiously, McCoy moved forward to check the Captain, and found that Kirk was already coming round.

"Spock!" The Captain was clearly distressed and agitated.

"Take it easy, Jim." Quickly, the Doctor pressured a shot into Kirk's arm, breathing a silent prayer of relief that the Captain seemed mentally undamaged.

Feverishly, Kirk shook off the Doctor's hand, and sitting up, stared horrified at the Vulcan next to him. He reached out to Spock, but McCoy held him back and stopped him.

"Don't touch him. You don't know for sure what's wrong with him. If you make physical contact, this... alien, or whatever it is, might flow back to you."

Kirk closed his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was heavy with self-recrimination.

"It was a trap. It was Spock it wanted, not me. It knew it couldn't enter his mind directly, so it used me as bait. I tried to fight it, to prevent Spock from finding out, but I must have broadcast something unknowingly.

"Bones, what are we to do if it destroys his mind like it did the others?"

McCoy shook his head. He couldn't find it in himself to give false comfort. They both knew that the danger to the Vulcan was very real.

Gently, McCoy helped Kirk up and sat him on a chair at the table. "Jim, we mustn't give up hope. Maybe he'll be able to fight

this thing successfully. At least he stands a better chance than you would have done."

But Kirk was beyond reassurance. The attack on his mind had weakened and confused him, lessening his ability to cope. "If his mind is destroyed, he'd be better off dead. Being mentally impaired would be his worst nightmare come true."

The Doctor heard the rising hysteria in the Captain's voice and spoke bluntly. "Not his worst nightmare, Jim. If it were you down there fighting this thing, it would destroy him more. It was his decision to do this, and nothing you, or anyone else, could have done would have stopped him. Now snap out of it and remember you're in command of this Starship."

His words drenched over Kirk like an ice-cold shower, and calmed him down. Taking a deep breath, the Captain shuddered. "I'm sorry, Bones. You're right, of course. It's just..."

"Forget it." The Doctor smiled shakily, relieved that Kirk seemed to have rallied. "Now stay there while I check him over."

McCoy knelt next to the Vulcan and activated the scanner. As he did so, Spock groaned and slumped forward into the Doctor's arms, his face blank and expressionless.

"Help me get him up onto the bed!" McCoy barked the order at a Captain who was already rising anxiously from his chair. Between them, they manoeuvred the Vulcan onto Kirk's bed, where he lay unconscious while McCoy examined him.

"Bones?"

McCoy winced inwardly at the pleading in Kirk's voice. He spoke hesitantly, unwilling to raise Kirk's hopes prematurely.

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with him."

As he spoke, the Vulcan moved restlessly on the bed and opened his eyes.

"Spock!" Kirk couldn't conceal his anxiety, nor his relief when the Vulcan turned his head towards him.

"Captain."

Spock's voice was flat and toneless, and the extreme formality of the response puzzled and worried the Captain.

"Has the creature gone? Did you drive it away successfully?" Kirk tried to inject a measure of command back into his voice, feeling that the Vulcan had had all the emotion he could cope with.

Despite McCoy's protests, Spock swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, brushing the Doctor impatiently aside. "The creature has not gone, Captain. It has been destroyed. It could not withstand the contact with a superior, disciplined mind."

"I see." Kirk wanted to ask the hows and whys, but held back, sensing his friend's fatigue. "I'll need a full report, Spock, as soon as you feel able. And - thank you for coming to my aid like that."

The Vulcan turned away from him without comment, and looked at McCoy. "Doctor, I am very tired. Perhaps I could rest here for a while, and make my formal report later."

Kirk opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again in response to McCoy's slight shake of the head. He spoke reluctantly.

"Very well, Spock. I'll leave McCoy to check you over, but I'll need to see you as soon as you're rested."

Receiving no response, the Captain unwillingly left the room. He waited in the corridor outside for McCoy to join him.

"Well, what's the matter with him? Can we take his word for it that this thing has been destroyed? If we couldn't detect it in the first place, how can we be sure that it's gone now?"

McCoy shrugged helplessly.

"I don't know, Jim. I can only say that as he's half Human, I'm sure that the creature couldn't remain inside him without causing at least some measurable irregularity to the brain waves. As it is, physically he checks out 100% okay.

"Emotionally? Well, you're probably better equipped to deal with that side of him than I am.

"He saved your sanity and maybe your life by taking that creature into himself. That in itself was traumatic. Then having to destroy the creature, however alien, however dangerous, must also have been abhorrent to him."

He reached out and held Kirk's arm, realising that the Captain intended to re-enter the room.

"Not now, Jim. Leave him for an hour or so. Try again when he's had time to come to terms with what has happened. Now come with me to sickbay where I can check you over properly. And that's a medical order," he finished, anticipating Kirk's protest. "The fact that you feel okay doesn't alter the fact that you were also attacked by that thing."

Reluctantly accepting the truth of what McCoy was saying, Kirk unhappily followed the Doctor to the sickbay.

When Kirk returned to his cabin some time later, Spock was no longer there. After an increasingly anxious search, the Captain found him in one of the observation rooms, looking out at the stars. For a moment he stood and watched his friend, noticing the tenseness in the frame silhouetted against the starlight, and wondered how he was going to breach the barrier that seemed to have sprung up between them.

After a minute he crossed the room to join the Vulcan at the window, and the two stood in silence, side by side, until finally Kirk said, "Spock, I think we need to talk."

The Vulcan drew a deep breath. "Yes, Captain, I believe we do."

Inwardly, Kirk grimaced at the formal 'Captain' instead of the

usual off-duty 'Jim'. "You're upset about the creature's death."

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "Upset, Captain?" But he did not deny it. "I was not in contact with it for long enough to know all of its history. I do know, however, that it was comparatively young, a freak mutation, and that sooner or later it was doomed to die, still young."

"It should have been a symbiote. In a true symbiosis, the host and the 'parasite' benefit each other. This was a true parasite, causing its host's destruction every time it fed, and as such, it was bound to be defeated eventually."

"My regret lies in that it was not malevolent. It had the instincts of its kind, it wanted only to live and to grow, as do all living creatures. It regretted the damage it did to its hosts but it was unable not to damage them. It sought my mind because it hoped that a stronger mind could support it; but because my mind was its superior, I destroyed it, not through intent, and for that I am sorry. Had there been more time, I might have been able to re-educate it to join another mind in a more peaceful fashion."

Kirk was upset by the Vulcan's statement. "Spock, if you hadn't destroyed it, it would have damaged all the Humans on the ship. No-one is asking you to play God, but surely your duty lies first with your friends."

The Vulcan turned towards him, and Kirk flinched at the anger in his eyes.

"And my duty to you? I was right to demand a link to protect you, and you denied me. What right have you to play God with our friendship?"

Kirk was taken aback by the Vulcan's outburst. He cursed himself for not realising how upset Spock had been by his decision, and sought desperately for the right words to say.

"Spock, whatever my motives were, I was right. Even the bond we had put us both at risk. It was your mind the creature wanted, and it knew that to protect me you would drop your shields. The fact that you were able to destroy it was pure chance. It was for your sake that I denied the link."

They stared at each other, both knowing that they were faced with a dilemma for which there was no solution. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the Vulcan smiled, but it was a small, sad smile.

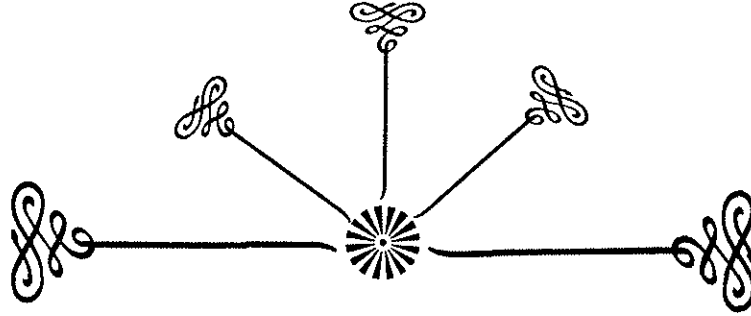
"It would appear, then, Captain, that you are considered to be my one weakness."

Kirk couldn't quite manage a smile in response, but was relieved that the tension had been dissipated. Reaching out, he gripped the Vulcan's shoulder.

"As you are mine. This isn't the first time we've faced that fact, and I doubt whether it will be the last."

Dropping his hand, he swallowed hard and made a desperate bid to return to normality. "Well, Mr. Spock, are you ready to give me that report now?" Turning, he headed for the doorway.

After a moment, the Vulcan merely raised an eyebrow, and followed him from the room.



PROBLEM

"I am what I am - I cannot change - "
 Must limits set to Human range
 Confine *your* spirit too?
 What Vulcan culture once instilled
 And boy heroically willed
 Bind you your whole life through?

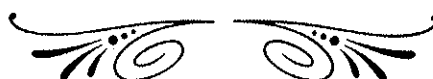
"Why strive so hard to be the best
 Of one world only?" Fearful lest
 You jeopardise control
 Too proud to change your hard-won bent
 Undrawn to such experiment
 You torture your own soul

We suffer too, we who have borne
 For love your unrelenting scorn
 Which underrates our powers
 But though to exalt your Vulcan part
 You oft deny your Human heart
 You cannot outwit ours

For we observe and we pursue
 The glancing hint, the tenuous clue
 The half-revealing pause
 The shaft that lights up in the gloom
 That cold and secret hidden room
 With locked and bolted doors

In which your spirit finds an air
 Congenially pure and spare,
 And islanded in calm,
 Guard dropped and visored helm put by,
 In solitude you can apply
 Quiet study's healing balm.

The world breaks in - alerts, alarms -
 So many calls to take up arms
 And each may put in doubt
 The single mind, the rational end
 For should you leap to save a friend -
 Why, then your secret's out...



WHEN FRIENDSHIP WAITS

by

Marcia Pecor

"Tuna salad. It gave me tuna salad!"

"What'd you say, Jim?"

Kirk stared in disbelief at the sandwich on his tray.

"Nothing, Bones. I suppose I shouldn't expect the synthesiser to give me a chicken sandwich simply because I ordered it."

"Well, order another one," said the physician, his mouth full.

Kirk waved his hand in futility and dumped the unappetising lump back in the recycler. He sat down next to McCoy and concentrated on his coffee. Interesting how many ways there were to stir a beverage. There was the stirring stick, though that was commonplace and unimaginative. But if he turned the cup 180 degrees in one direction and then quickly reversed it, there was a pleasing tidal effect. If he blew on the surface at the right angle and trajectory he could achieve an effective water spout, although this method cooled it too quickly for his taste. Then, of course, he could always use his finger - that is, if he didn't mind the blisters...

"Jim!"

"Huh?" The Captain guiltily withdrew a reddened forefinger from his coffee. "I'm sorry, Bones. Were you talking to me?"

"Yes I was talking to you, but it seems you'd stepped out for a moment." McCoy smirked in amusement and took another bite of his lunch.

"What did you ask me?"

"I didn't ask you anything; I was just making conversation." McCoy put down his fork and looked the Captain over with a critical eye. "Jim," he said, lowering his voice so that officers at nearby tables couldn't overhear, "have you been feeling all right the last couple of days? You look tired."

Kirk frowned. "Yes, I've been feeling fine. And I've been resting, and I've been doing those exercises, and I've been resting some more..."

"Whoa, Jim!" said McCoy in a soothing tone. "Don't get your feathers ruffled. Just how often have you been doing the exercises?"

"Two or three times a day."

"Have the muscles been loosening up in your shoulders?"

The commanding officer sighed resignedly. "Yes, mother, and they don't bother me at all - hardly. My ribs are better, too."

Kirk looked sideways at his friend, hesitated a moment, then leaned forward to whisper urgently, "Bones, this resting business is all well and good for a day or two, but after a week it begins to pall."

McCoy held up a hand. "Now, now, just hold it right there. I know what you're going to say. 'Let me back on the bridge, Bones - work's the best medicine.' Well, you may get around me when there's some galactic disaster you have to put to rights single-handedly, but not this time. Sulu can handle things just fine for the next day or so."

Kirk grunted in disgust, got up and tossed his cup into the disposal chute. McCoy called out a goodbye and the Captain waved over his shoulder as he walked out of the officers' mess, the doors closing behind him. He hesitated in the corridor, debating whether to go back to his cabin or to get in a little exercise. The thought of cool water closing over his body beckoned him, and he made his way to the pool.

When he arrived he found the place deserted, and felt a pang of regret. Frankly, he was lonely. Since they had left Elba II six days previously he had spent a day in sickbay, the doctor going over him with a fine-tooth comb; then he was confined to quarters until his cracked ribs and bruised kidney could begin to heal. Kirk had refused an LEG, which would have revealed whether any neural damage had been caused by Garth's sonic chair, so McCoy was keeping a close watch on him.

However, after three days of inactivity Kirk began pestering the doctor for something to do to speed the healing process. Busy with a new research project and anxious for some peace, McCoy had given him the exercise regime and a promise that he could be back on duty - at least part-time - in a few days. That didn't take care of the main problem, however. Kirk desperately missed being on the bridge. For him, work truly was the best medicine, despite the doctor's feelings about it. He missed Uhura, Chekov and Sulu. He missed conversations with Scott and the details that went into running a ship.

And he missed Spock most of all.

Spock was at Starbase 17, involved in some preparatory research for the charting mission coming up. His First Officer had been off-ship many times during their service together, but never had Kirk missed him more than now. He was due to return in 36 hours, and Kirk could envision the shuttlecraft gliding towards the Enterprise as the Starship came within range of Starbase 17.

Kirk grinned, but caught himself as a childish giggle almost escaped his lips. He frowned, irritated with himself, and mentally blamed McCoy for this conduct unbecoming an officer. *Must be cabin fever*, he told himself as he entered a changing cubicle.

He changed quickly and dived from the side of the pool, letting himself rise to the surface with the bubbles in a dead-man's float. Turning over, he did a cautious backstroke, careful of the healing ribs and shoulders. As he swam the length of the pool his mind played back the events of a week ago, when he had tried to escape from Elba II and suffered the consequences of his efforts. The worst part of the whole affair had been the blinding headaches - an after-effect of the sonic vibrations, according to McCoy. The good doctor had wanted to slap an LEG on him, but Kirk had had enough

people messing with his head lately. He cited Dr. Corey's immediate recovery as proof that the sonic chair didn't have any permanent effect, so McCoy had backed down. The headaches had stopped during his confinement, and McCoy had thankfully quit running after him with a mediscan.

Kirk blew out a little air, jackknifed, and swam into the depths, his eardrums popping from the increased pressure. It was darker near the bottom, the edges of the pool receding fuzzily in the distance. Looking up, he had a fish-eye view of the surface. He wondered what it was like to live under water, a natural habitat. There was a race of people on Mercedes IV who had built beautiful cities under the vast oceans that covered their planet. Kirk had visited there once, but had to let Spock take over the diplomatic mission when his diving shield had malfunctioned and an old-fashioned case of the bends had sidelined him for a couple of days. He had been fascinated by the emerald beauty of the deep waters, but the crushing pressure on his chest as the shield failed...

Kirk almost took a breath as he recalled, all too vividly, the sense of helplessness he had felt on Mercedes. Suppose that were to happen here, suppose he couldn't get back up in time? His mind abruptly filled with the image of a lone swimmer sucking in lungfuls of water and finally coming to the top, belly up, dead eyes staring skyward. As fear began to get a grip he kicked and thrashed towards the surface, panic making him awkward and causing him to forget all his Academy training. His oxygen-depleted lungs screamed for air, his heart racing.

Suddenly, just as quickly as it had come, the fear was gone and he could once again think rationally. He kicked cleanly, and brought his arms down in powerful strokes, ignoring the black dots before his eyes, concentrating on reaching the surface of the pool wavering above him.

Don't breathe, he ordered himself as he fought the compelling need to exhale the carbon dioxide building in his lungs. He knew that once he exhaled, inhaling was a physiological axiom. The surface was just above him, but he could feel his heart labouring, and the roaring in his ears meant imminent unconsciousness. With one more hard kick he broke the surface, and the room echoed with the sound of gasping and coughing. The Captain trod water until his head cleared, then he made for the edge of the pool. He hauled himself out of the water and collapsed on the edge for a few minutes, still breathing hard.

As he recovered, Kirk was appalled at his reactionary behaviour in the pool. Panic was a worst enemy, brought on by the most crippling emotion of all - fear. He knew he was Human, and would occasionally experience fear and other strong emotions, but he had been trained to dominate the debilitating ones, to control them rather than be controlled by them. That was a premise of command rank. But here, today, in the pool, fear had come in to him as if someone had opened a door, and then left just as quickly, just as unexplainedly.

He felt no fear now as he looked at the water. Sitting up, he made himself go over the Mercedes incident detail by detail, reliving each sensation he had experienced before rescue. But the fear was not there. On impulse he dived in and swam the length of the pool twice, then breathed out and plunged to the bottom. He came back up, got out, and changed back into his uniform. Not once had the

fear come to bother him.

Dismissing the incident as a one-time occurrence, Kirk left the memory of it behind him with the darkened pool.

"You are up late, Doctor."

"Spock! Welcome back," said McCoy, turning in surprise. "I've been so busy I didn't even notice the time."

"I have just arrived. Ship's grapevine informed me you were still awake, so I thought perhaps I would stop in to give you these medical samples you requested from Starbase 17."

"Thank you, Spock. Jim will be glad to see you."

"I surmise the Captain is in his quarters, due to the lateness of the hour."

"Yes, getting his beauty rest. He's been chewing at the bit to get back on the bridge, and I promised he could go to work tomorrow. Don't be surprised if he doesn't do something embarrassing, like tell you he's glad to see you. I must be getting addle-pated, but I'm even glad to see you."

"Why, thank you, Dr. McCoy." The First Officer started to speak, hesitated, then continued, "May I inquire why my presence would give you such gratification?"

"Oh, one or two reasons," said the doctor, turning reticent suddenly.

"Such as?"

McCoy busied himself at a small vat in which a green gelatinous mass was simmering. "Well, one reason is this. I've had some theories about altering the proteineic DNA of the regen solution so that it could be used over and over again, and I would welcome your opinion. As you know, after it's been used on a patient it quickly degenerates and must be disposed of. Its very properties prevent it from being recycled or resynthesised, as it becomes putrefaction itself. Even if we tried to resynthesise it, the recycler would have to work overtime just to keep the byproducts of the mix from contaminating the entire synthesised food supply, not to mention the smell..."

"Doctor," interrupted Spock, "please do get to the point. I understand the difficulties engendered by regen solutions."

"Well, anyway, I've got some ideas about altering the genetic code and thereby causing it to 'forget' to decompose. To make it as though the patient were still there..."

"To introduce a Human element."

"Or Vulcan, or Galesian, or whatever. But the tricky part is, each person is 'tagged' by his/her own xeno-genetic code, or genome, and the regen identifies with that code. What I want to try to do is to remove the personal code, while leaving just enough of the genetic factor there to fool the regen into maintaining its existence. Then it could conceivably be used over and over again,

just by introducing a new genome."

Spock's face had grown as blank as the grey wall behind him, and he had clasped his hands behind his back in a grip that whitened his knuckles. If McCoy had known him as Jim Kirk did, he would have seen that this was the Vulcan equivalent of jumping up and down with excitement.

"Doctor McCoy, your ideas are particularly intriguing, as one of my specific interests outside my own field is xeno-genetic biology. It would be most gratifying if you would allow me to observe your work when time allows."

The doctor was pleased and honoured that the First Officer would so openly express an interest in his work, but a frown cut across his smile. "What about the charting? Aren't you in charge of that? You've done a lot of work on it already, and it will take up most of your time."

"I believe I can arrange my schedule to fit yours, Dr. McCoy. As you know, Vulcans can, at need, do without sleep for several weeks, with proper preparation. I will be particular about getting enough rest during that time," he continued as McCoy started to protest.

The doctor relaxed and flipped the computer monitor round so that Spock could see it. "Take a look at this, will you? I've started a model of the matrix here..."

The two men in blue bent their heads over the glowing screen, McCoy forgetting for the moment any other reasons he may have been glad of Spock's return from Starbase 17.

Queen to queen's level three... Kirk moved uneasily in his sleep. *Starship Fleet Captain - that's an honourable title... I love my work...*

Kirk jerked awake, the words of the dream echoing in his mind. He sat on the edge of the bed and wiped cold sweat from his face. Damned dreams! They were becoming more pressing, more vivid, each time he fell asleep.

A glance at the chronometer told him he had an hour before bridge duty, and the idea of lying there rehashing nightmares didn't appeal to him. He dressed hastily and made for the pool. Since the 'incident', which he had never mentioned to anyone, he had made a point of visiting the pool frequently, but he had never once experienced the return of fear. If he hadn't been so certain of his own memory he could swear it had never happened... almost.

Kirk hadn't been in the water long when helm officers Sulu and Chekov dashed from the changing cubicles and made for the pool's edge in a mad-dash sprint. Full speed they leapt from the edge and cannon-balled into the water, sending up spumes of H₂O and laughter. Only then did they notice the Captain watching their antics from the edge of the pool. When they realised they were not alone they began to behave more like officers than midshipmen, doing sedate warm-ups in the shallows. Chekov sighed in relief when he saw Kirk take a lap, thankful that he was no longer under his commanding officer's scrutiny. He made for the ladder at the deep end, wanting to work on his high dive.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his ankle, and he was jerked under. *Hikaru!* He splashed to the top, Sulu in pursuit, and grabbed for his friend as he surfaced. Chekov's hands closed on a sandy head, and he had already shoved it under when the young Russian realised in horror that he had just ducked his Captain!

Kirk came up spluttering, and with a grin that held pure devilment he proceeded to splash water into the navigator's face. Chekov grinned in delight and his eyes sparkled with mischief of his own as he dived for distance and cover.

Several feet below he met up with the real Sulu, and gesturing they made their plan of attack. Coming up quickly under Kirk, each grabbed an arm and lifted him bodily, throwing him headfirst into a belly-flop. Kirk surfaced, gasping, and defended himself as only a trained Starfleet officer could. With all the splashing, kicking and ducking, it was hard to see whose arms and legs belonged to whom. Finally, breathing hard and still laughing, Kirk held up his hand to end the fun. Pointing to the chronometer, he reminded them that duty called.

As the helm officers climbed out regretfully, Kirk decided to take one more lap. He hadn't felt this good in days. The sore muscles now moved with complete suppleness, and the ribs gave only a faint reminder of their former tenderness. The blood coursed through his veins and arteries and he felt rejuvenated, alive. He couldn't bring himself to end the pleasant exercise just yet; he set off in a breaststroke, then pulled his arms down next to his body and corkscrewed, delighting in the patterns the air bubbles made as they spiralled around him. He had no idea such simple pleasure could be so deadly...

It was almost as if he had dozed off, and wakened to find himself floating quietly in the water. Kirk was looking straight down, seeing his own shadow reflecting dimly off the bottom. Realisation dawned that he was not breathing; in fact, he was not doing anything at all. He tried consciously to move his arms, which were floating at his sides - nothing. He tried to turn his head - again, nothing. His legs - no response.

Kirk felt absolutely no fear, only curiosity about what was happening to him. As his vision dimmed he perceived calmly that he was blacking out, and his last conscious thought was how absurd it was to die in a pool without inhaling a drop of water.

"Dr. McCoy. Report to rec pool 2 immediately."

McCoy growled and hit the intercom switch. "What's the problem?"

"A near-drowning, Doctor," said Sulu, his voice pitched a fraction higher than normal. "Pavel is administering PR now."

"Well, I'm five minutes away, man! Call a paramed and bring the crewman to sickbay when he's stabilised."

"Sir, the crewman is Captain Kirk."

McCoy almost choked. "I'm on my way." He grabbed a medikit and bolted for the door, cursing himself soundly as he ran.

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"He's coming round," said the helmsman with relief.

"Good! I was beginning to see stars, and I *don't* mean the kind we see outside the ship!" panted Chekov, sitting back on his heels.

Sulu's evaluation of the Captain's recovery was correct, and Jim Kirk was sitting up, propped on his elbows, when McCoy ran in. The good doctor masked his relief with irritation.

"Jim, what happened here? As if I don't have enough to do..."

"Bones." There was a warning in the Captain's tone, and McCoy shut up. Kirk looked at Chekov and Sulu hovering nearby, and smiled his thanks. "If you two feel I'm properly rescued, you'd better report to the bridge."

Their exchanged looks of impending disaster prompted him to add, "Inform Mr. Spock you are late on my responsibility. I'll explain when I come up."

Sulu and Chekov grinned in relief as they left, Kirk looking after them in puzzlement.

"I don't remember them coming back into the room. I must have passed out before then."

"Jim, it's a good thing they *did* come back! Now once more, and this time the whole thing. What happened?"

Kirk got up and began towelling off, avoiding the doctor's piercing gaze. "Haven't you heard of someone getting a cramp, Bones?"

"There you go, answering a question with a question. I know that routine. Hold out your hands."

"What?"

"I said hold out your hands, and don't you *dare* ask me what for!"

The Captain held out his shaking hands. At McCoy's concerned look he began towelling his hair, again avoiding the doctor's eyes.

"Jim, I think I'd better check you over."

"Bones, I'm fine. Ask Chekov and Sulu. We had almost an hour of vigorous exercise, and I had no difficulty. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were just trying to think up another excuse for keeping me off the bridge."

Dr. McCoy looked at his friend for a long moment, not missing a detail. Kirk was glowing with health despite the mishap. No more headaches, muscles toned, kidney healed. If he hadn't seen the trembling hands, observed the Captain's reluctance to look at him... *Well, pitchforks and pointed ears! I'd probably react the same way if somebody'd had to haul me out of the water.* "No, Jim, I wouldn't do that to you, especially since this is your first day back. You look fine to me. Just keep a swimming partner from now on, will ya?"

"I'll consider it, Doctor," said Kirk, smiling, and made for the changing cubicle. "Oh, and Bones," he said, turning in

mid-stride, "don't mention this to Mr. Spock. I'd rather he didn't know. Not now, anyway."

"Whatever you say, Jim, although I can't say I understand why..."

"I have my reasons," he said shortly, turning back towards the cubicle. "I'm due on the bridge."

"All right, Jim, I'll see you..."

Kirk was already gone through the door.

The First Officer's face was blue in the light of his computer monitor as he completed routine on-shift duties. Only a part of his mind was on the work, however - this function taken to task, that result noted and relegated to memory or computer banks. Mr. Spock was not absent-minded in his work; on the contrary, his bridge duties were handled in a most efficient, methodical and logical way. It was just that, with Spock, he could concentrate on doing several things at once - as he was doing now.

The Vulcan went about his business in his usual quiet way, but his mind was reviewing information acquired at Starbase 17 and formulating a plan of action for the charting which would begin tomorrow. Charting was a routine operation, almost a mundane one, but vital to space exploration. This particular job had always been relegated to the Science Officer, not so much for the mapping - ship's cartographers handled that aspect most efficiently - but because with new areas opening up came new stars, new planets, new phenomena. True, most charting remained simply that, but occasionally there were new, exciting data which had to be extrapolated and deciphered. This was Spock's expertise. This was his element - he fairly basked in it, though his commanding officer found charting to be the most boring aspect of their mission, and became rather... Human... when enduring it.

Spock hesitated, the thoughts of his Captain and friend creating a hitch in the otherwise smooth function of his thinking processes. A strange friendship, theirs. Jim Kirk had a way of making him reach down into himself to find a Spock hitherto untapped, unexplored. His very alienness had once cringed at finding any Human qualities within himself, and McCoy was an excellent barometer for measuring his ability to maintain his Vulcan psyche.

Kirk, on the other hand, never demanded from Spock what he could not give. Jim just gave all that he had, and that was enough. Time after time, from the day they first met, this Human - this stubborn, emotional, dedicated explorer with a wanderlust and an intense inner drive - had shown himself to be a friend.

Spock, at first hesitant, even reluctant to trust himself in such a relationship - he who had signed on a Starship manned predominantly by Humans in order to train and discipline himself to do away with those innocuous feelings he was saddled with - found himself admiring, even liking, this young Captain. Yes, liking, though it had once shamed him to admit to such an emotion.

After recovering from the Psi 2000 virus, however, he no longer suffered from this embarrassment and deemed himself most fortunate

to have such a friendship. In his Vulcan heart Kirk was T'hy'la; in his Human heart, Kirk was his brother. Interesting that it was his Vulcan heart which expressed this unusual relationship through that inexplicable link which had formed between his psionic mind and Kirk's non-psionic one, a link which now placed each of them only a thought away from the other.

Spock straightened, mentally correcting himself for letting his thoughts wander. He must complete the final disciplines tonight before entering into that state in which he could function without sleep for an extended period of time. He must not let himself become distracted by anything, including friendship.

But as he again began to go over the rudiments of the imminent charting, a corner of his mind still turned to Kirk. Perhaps it was because he had seen little of his Captain since he had gone to Starbase 17, two days after the Enterprise left Elba II. It had been an uneasy farewell...

Spock sighed, realising he had better deal with this nagging memory if he was going to get any work done. Relegating the charting overview to another compartment in his mind while he still performed various bridge duties, he turned his greater attention to that night he had come, unannounced, to Kirk's cabin.

Spock had been preoccupied with the work he would be doing at Starbase 17. The Enterprise would be coming into shuttle range before making a medical supply drop-off at a nearby mining colony, and Spock would be taking the Galileo to the Starbase alone. He only wanted to see the Captain for a few minutes and say goodbye, having been unable to speak to him recently. McCoy hadn't released him from sickbay until that morning, and frankly, Spock thought the doctor had gone a bit overboard this time. True, Jim had not fared too well on Elba II, but he was certainly not about to fall apart when they left the planet a few hours after Garth had been subdued. A bit tired, maybe...

He signalled and walked in unhesitatingly as the doors slid open, and found Kirk hunched on the edge of the bed, clutching his head between both hands and moaning in pain.

Departure plans were immediately forgotten as the First Officer knelt beside the Captain, his eyes showing alarm.

"Jim," he remembered saying, "what's wrong?" Kirk had suffered from headaches before, but never like this.

"My head... it's on fire," Jim whispered hoarsely. "Spock, help me - I'm going to be sick."

Spock moved to help his friend rise, and was just able to break his fall when Jim's face blanched and he crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

Spock recalled McCoy's grumbles as he checked their friend over, finding nothing wrong with him. He had come to soon after McCoy arrived, the pain remaining.

"Jim, I want to do an LEG scan on you. It might give me something more than..."

"No! I've had enough of that, Bones," said Kirk through clenched teeth. "You said yourself it was probably sonic resonators. They'll go away."

"Oh, is that so, Dr. Kirk? And when, in your inestimable opinion, will that be?"

"Bones, that's enough. Give me something, will you, so I can sleep. I promise, I'll let you do the LEG if the headaches don't go away soon."

The doctor mumbled under his breath as he prepared the hypo.

"I didn't understand you, Doctor," said Spock.

"I just said I'll give him two days, and that's all I'm giving you!" he fussed, shaking his finger at Kirk. He drove the hypo home, and soon Kirk's eyelids began to droop.

"Spock," he murmured sleepily, "see you in a week..."

Kirk slipped into unconsciousness, but the First Officer heard the rest of the sentence in his mind. "... and don't worry!"

As Spock recalled the happenings of a week ago he realised all too well that the link between them these past few days had been - well, unused, for lack of a better word. Spock had been very busy, and according to updates from Dr. McCoy, so had Jim. No doubt about it, Kirk was a single-minded man at times, especially when he was determined to get back on the bridge. When McCoy had advised him that the headaches had ceased, and Jim had begun badgering the doctor to let him go back to work, Spock had stopped worrying. But now...

The lift doors opened and Kirk strode in, beaming upon everyone on the bridge, acknowledging the crew's friendly welcome. After taking a brief (but loving) tour of the bridge, Kirk made his way to the con and sat, absolutely exuding pleasure. Spock almost had to shield from it, it was so overpowering. Strange how all the others bathed in it, like sunlight. *Humans.*

"Welcome back, Captain," said Spock, adding his voice to the others.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock, and I should say the same officially to you. Oh, and Spock," said Kirk, bouncing out of his chair and coming to stand close to his First Officer. He lowered his voice confidentially. "About Sulu and Chekov."

Spock's eyebrow rose just perceptibly. "We were working on a life-saving technique and the time slipped by. Entirely my fault, you understand."

"Of course, Captain," said Spock, noticing that Kirk had allowed his voice to carry enough for the young officers to hear. They were trying hard not to smile.

Kirk moved away and began to chat genially with Uhura, leaning against her console. Spock took the opportunity to look his friend over, and had to admit he had never seen him looking fitter. Despite Kirk's chafing, rest had been good for him.

His worry laid to rest Spock carefully took his friendship and the quiet link, and placed it in another compartment - one that he and only one other person could open. Unless something happened that brought about the necessity the link would remain mute. For, despite what Spock had told McCoy, placing himself in a prolonged waking state would require all his discipline, strength and will. It would be a long two weeks.

Captain's Log, Stardate 5738.6. We are into our second week of star charting in this quadrant. Mr. Spock has discovered interesting orbital data which may, in time, enable our cartographers to predict binary and trinary systems in the outer edges of our galaxy, thereby enabling the UFP to pick certain areas more preferable for exploration, based on what we already know about the probability of Class M planets in certain star systems. Mr. Spock's preliminary computations estimate 4.27 days should complete the work.

Kirk stifled a yawn as he punched in his log entry. How he detested charting missions! Three quarters of his crew sat around twiddling their thumbs while a few specialists did the work. More problems had come up during these 'milk runs' than at any other time, simply because the crew had been as bored as he was. Even leisure computer library time was often disallowed because of the data Spock must get from it. Kirk didn't mind that too much - he had a marvellous supply of antique books in his cabin to occupy his free time - but he didn't like his crew sitting idly by.

The Captain's eyes, always looking around the bridge, settled on Ensign Chekov. There, he *did* see it - a tiny, flesh-coloured audio receiver. The navigator was listening to music on the bridge! Furious, Kirk rose and stood rigidly behind the young Russian.

Chekov, manning his station, was unaware that his commanding officer came within a fraction of ripping the receiver from his ear before he clenched his fists to his sides and walked back to the con. As Kirk sat his body shook with suppressed anger. Part of him was livid because Chekov had taken this opportunity of relaxed duty to break a bridge rule; another part of him knew that the offence didn't merit the response. Chekov was a good navigator. Even now, as he listened to his music, he was alert, attentive to his console. Why should he be so angry with him?

As Kirk's analytical side began to question his anger it flared even more for a moment, making him want to explode in rage and stomp his feet in a great tantrum; then it subsided, and the shaking stopped. A few seconds later he was his usual calm self, and no-one on the bridge was the wiser.

Thank god Spock's in conference with the chief cartographer, he thought. His First Officer would have picked up on this angry episode without hesitation. Kirk was also glad that Spock had 'closed shop' for a while, the Captain's way of explaining the few times his friend had deemed it necessary to inhibit certain telepathic abilities in order to concentrate on other mind disciplines, such as telling his body it wasn't tired.

Spock had been extremely busy lately. If he wasn't with the cartographers or at his science station he was with McCoy, working on regen solution experiments. He never neglected his regular

bridge duties, though Kirk had offered to relieve him of that job. Spock had refused, saying it would be illogical to assume that he had time to devote to his 'hobby' but no time to perform his officer's duties.

Kirk had given in, mainly because he was too tired to argue. The first two or three days back on the bridge had been a tonic. He was busy catching up on routine paperwork - reports and the like - co-ordinating some minor repair work with Scott, and so on. But after that the boredom began to seep in. He lost all interest in the pool, though he still made himself go, and he more than once found himself daydreaming on the bridge.

In fact, now that he thought about it, he was catching himself doing a lot of things on the bridge. This bout of anger, for instance, was not the first emotional episode he had experienced there. Just yesterday he had found himself in the middle of a trip down memory lane, reliving rare nostalgic scenes of childhood days and his parents, which brought tears to his eyes. It had been difficult to come out of that one. And the dreams bothered him most of all...

They were the same each night, voices from the past and the not so distant past, voices which made the hairs stand up on his neck and brought him jerking out of sleep again and again. His recent new strength was draining away, slowly, but he figured he could hold out another four days. Then they would be out of this endless track and on to better things.

"Uhura, I'm going to get some coffee. Mind the store while I'm gone," he said as he made his way to the lift. When he passed her console he leaned over her shoulder and whispered, "And tell Pavel to secure that audio receiver while I'm gone, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," she smiled, having won her bet with Sulu that the Captain would see the device before his break. "Ensign Chekov," she called as the lift doors closed on the Captain, "a word with you, please."

Kirk walked down the corridor towards the rec room, acknowledging the greetings of crewmembers absently. His thoughts were back on the turbolift, where he had just endured a rush of adrenaline and 'fight or flight' symptoms for a few seconds. As the lift began its descent the feeling had hit him, as if he was on the bridge and facing a Klingon battlecruiser just disengaging its cloaking device. He had hung on, the rush had passed, and he had managed to regain reasonable control by the time the doors opened.

The Captain was becoming concerned. He was never one to run to the doctor for every little twinge; on the contrary, McCoy wound up running after him. Only now, when he would have been relieved if the doctor had shown some concern, McCoy was so busy with regen experiments he rarely saw him. And, for that matter, he hardly saw Spock any more, except when he was on the bridge, his friend's enigmatic brain working on several things at once. There was barely time to breathe, much less talk...

Kirk was delighted to find the doctor and the First Officer seated in the rec room, empty cups at their elbows, data flimsies spread between them. They were deep in conversation, and didn't notice him until he sat next to McCoy, coffee in hand.

"This looks serious, gentlemen. No time for simple coffee?" he teased.

"Herb cha, Captain. We are taking a break."

"Closest we'll come to one, anyway, Jim. You're looking fit, although you're bored out of your skull, right?" quipped the physician.

"Well, just a little, Bones. It's only four more days, after all."

Spock and McCoy exchanged looks.

"Captain, my computations were not complete when I gave you that last estimate. I have calculated the time to be closer to 7.42 days. I gave the update to Lt. Uhura, but you had just left the bridge." Something not unlike regret tinged Spock's voice, knowing how much Kirk was looking forward to a change of venue.

"I see." Kirk realised he was frowning, wiped it off, and tried to look interested. "How are the experiments coming, Bones?"

"Excellently. Which reminds me, Spock, we've got time to test that last batch if we go now." McCoy gathered up their scattered data sheets and headed for the door.

"I will join you directly, Doctor." Spock stood, looking down at the Captain. "You will be off duty by the time I return to the bridge, I assume, Captain."

"Yes, Spock. Oh, don't be concerned about the extra days. Schedules will return to normal before we know it." Kirk glanced at the wall chronometer. "It's time I went back to work, too."

"Very well, Captain."

Kirk smiled perfunctorily and left the table. Looking after him, Spock was reminded of the link, considered the possibility, then rejected it. After all, Kirk was a grown man - if something bothered his friend he would certainly come to him about it. He turned on his heel and made for the science lab.

Kirk groaned in his sleep.

Yes, I recognise it. It's used for rehabilitation purposes.

"No..." he muttered, not yet awake.

Appearances can be deceiving... I've added certain refinements... The chair is no longer painless...

"No, I won't!" he shouted, his voice activating the cabin lights. He sat up against the wall, willing the shaking to stop, the strained breathing to slow. He would not be dominated by dreams, he would not be cowed by unwelcome emotions he could not explain. Kirk pulled his pillow to him, drawing up his knees. In the mirror across the room his reflection looked back at him accusingly.

"Lights out," he ordered, the image disappeared, and the lonely

man was enveloped in blackness.

"Spock, has Jim seemed all right to you lately?" asked McCoy over his shoulder, his arms up to the elbows in another failed regen batch.

"I have not had the opportunity to communicate with him recently, Doctor. We have been on different shifts for several days now. Why do you ask?" Spock proffered a towel for the physician, his nose wrinkling unconsciously at the faint dead-body odour the solution was emitting.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him much either, and when I have he's seemed a little quiet, reticent. I thought maybe you had... That perhaps you..."

"Dr. McCoy, Jim Kirk and I do not spend all our time in frivolous psionic discussions. The Captain has no telepathic abilities whatsoever, and I am often otherwise occupied."

"Okay, Spock, you're telling me to mind my own business, and I will, but there's not a person on the bridge who hasn't noticed how if you start a sentence, Jim finishes it; he gets an idea, you know what it is; you have a need, he senses it. I just thought maybe you might have insight..."

"Not this time, Doctor. Jim never makes unnecessary demands."

"And the necessary ones?"

"If they are necessary, Dr. McCoy, then they are made."

"You're saying I should just let it go?"

"I am saying you should let the Captain make his own choices, Doctor, otherwise you will be challenging his ability to command."

McCoy looked slightly taken aback. Spock was most likely right, but would he hold the same opinion if he knew about the near-drowning, or about his own vague misgivings? But he had given his promise to Kirk, and as long as the danger signal didn't go off in his head he would wait and see.

"Okay, Spock, let's try this one, then. Do you have the formula?"

Both men buried themselves in their work in an attempt to bury other things which might hover near the heart.

Kirk signed a fuel consumption report and leaned back in his chair, relieved shift was almost over. The day hadn't been too bad, really. He had been on his guard after the episode the other night, when he had felt so utterly alone, but nothing untoward had happened since then. In fact, nothing at all had been happening, except more routine, more boredom. Even the unflappable Mr. Sulu had taken to vigorous exercise with the foil and samurai sword. He must have some way to vent some of that pent-up energy. His pupil was a rather reluctant Pavel Chekov. At least the Russian wasn't bringing his audio receiver onto the bridge any more! Kirk chuckled.

Behind him, Lt. Uhura was humming a sad melody, an ancient song of lost love and severed friendships. The music was haunting, and had a way of staying with you long after the sounds had died. Kirk loved to hear the communications officer sing. He often thought she had missed her true vocation, but then he wouldn't have her expertise here on the bridge. No, he was glad she chose a Starship.

He turned command over to Mr. Sulu and joined Uhura in the lift, as their shift ended at the same time. "Where to, Lieutenant?" he asked as the doors closed.

"Rec room, Captain. I'm feeling in voice tonight."

"You are, ma'am," said Kirk, half bowing, honouring her. "That song you were humming - it's so beautiful. Is it old?"

"Very old, sir, over 600 years old. It's a Scottish ballad about friends and husbands going off to war and never coming back. It's about those who were left behind. It is a beautiful song, but so lonely."

"I know, it... it made me feel like..." Kirk stopped as if someone had put a knife to his back.

I brought something down which could have cured you, but he destroyed it.

"Captain, what is it?"

A cage is a cage, Jim.

Kirk felt the loneliness crash in on him, as it had tried to do the other night, but now the door simply opened; there was nothing he could do but endure it until it had passed. He sank to his knees under the weight of it, aware of Uhura kneeling next to him, but unable to respond to her. He could only dwell in this utter aloneness. Tears came to his eyes as he felt his friends ripped from him, his thoughts dissipating, with only one focus remaining - emptiness, grief, despair - total, abysmal.

Uhura ordered the lift to stop by voice command. She knew they had only a few moments before ship's computers would override. She took the Captain's hand in her own and placed it against her cheek. Never mind that he was her Captain - right now he was only Jim Kirk, and he needed her. She didn't know how much.

Kirk felt her take his hand, felt her place it against her soft cheek. He reached out with his other hand, shaking as if palsied, and she met it with hers. The loneliness was coming in waves now, bringing with it new torment, new grief, and an old enemy, the blinding headache. Breathing hard, almost gasping, Kirk gripped Uhura's hand painfully and sought her eyes with his. She was his lifeline right now. Somewhere, in the deepest recesses of his mind, he knew he was not totally alone if she was there.

She spoke to him quietly about everyday things, all too aware of the computer override, keeping her voice steady. She broke one hand free of his and reached to wipe the tears from his face. As he spoke haltingly of his aloneness, of his feeling of being cut off from everyone he cared for, Uhura knew she would wish later she'd never heard these things. But now she must simply listen.

Gradually, the Captain calmed. He closed his eyes a moment and

let go of Uhura. The computer override kicked in and once again the turbolift descended. Kirk stood, jerked at his shirt, cleared his throat. As they neared deck 5 he gave her a quick, stern look.

"Lieutenant, what you have just witnessed is private - off the record, understand?"

"But Captain, I..."

"Please." His face stern, his eyes pleading.

"All right, Jim. Off the record."

The lift doors opened. Kirk reached to touch her cheek. "Thank you, Lieutenant. For everything."

He walked slowly down the corridor towards his cabin, surreptitiously wiping his eyes. Uhura wiped a few tears of her own and bypassed the rec room. There would be no singing tonight.

A signal at Kirk's door startled him out of his reverie. He sat at his desk, book opened but unread, as he had every night lately, waiting until sleep took him, and then the dreams...

The signal came again and he invited his visitors in, keying off the privacy lock. In strode McCoy, smiling, and Spock, carrying - of all things! - a bottle of Saurian brandy.

"Why, Spock! If I didn't see it I wouldn't believe it!"

"There are many things that we have not seen which must be believed, Captain. The fact that we have never looked upon them does not alter the truth that they do, indeed, exist."

"Scientific lesson for the day, Jim," said the doctor, making himself comfortable on the edge of Kirk's desk. Spock took a chair nearby.

"I take it this is a celebration of some kind?" Kirk folded his arms and smiled at the doctor. He was very glad of their company.

"A bit premature, I believe," interjected Spock, "as the solution was only mixed an hour ago."

"He's a pessimist, Jim. It has all the signs of success. I've got Peterson watching it like a hawk. We'll know soon whether it's decomposing or maintaining."

"Mr. Spock," said Kirk with feigned severity, "aren't you supposed to be on the bridge? I hope you haven't neglected your duties in favour of your hobby."

The Vulcan almost looked distressed. "Captain, I would never do anything of the kind. The experiments had reached a crucial point, so I arranged a change of shift with Lieutenant-Commander Rawlings. Certainly you do not object..."

Kirk laughed, McCoy joining in the joke. "Spock, I'm sorry I did that to you, but you've been so busy lately I couldn't help but take a poke at you."

Spock relaxed just perceptibly. "Ah, taking a poke. Another form of Earth humour?"

"Yes, Spock," started McCoy, warming up. "Something you would do well to..."

He was interrupted by the hailing signal.

"Dr. McCoy. This is the science lab."

"Hope you don't mind, Jim. I told her to call me here." At Kirk's nod, McCoy answered, "McCoy here. How's it going, Peterson?"

"Sir, the regen is maintaining," said Peterson, her voice jubilant. "It's ready to have a new genome introduced."

McCoy whooped and bounded for the door. "Come on, Spock, this is it!"

Spock rose calmly, but moved every bit as quickly as the hurrying physician. He stopped at the door and turned to see Kirk sitting at the desk, staring at his untasted brandy.

"Captain, would you care to join us? It is quite a triumph for McCoy."

The strained look which had been on his Captain's face cleared, and he got up so quickly the chair almost toppled. "I wouldn't miss it for anything, Mr. Spock."

McCoy had not waited for them. They had to catch another lift, and as they rode the levels Spock could feel Kirk's eyes on him. The Vulcan looked at his friend, and this time read signs of deep fatigue. How long had Jim been like this? How long had he not noticed? In the compartment the link lay dormant. Did it ever truly belong there? Was friendship ever quiescent, or did it simply die?

Jim.

Kirk jumped as if he'd been shocked. It had been a long time.

Friend.

T'hy'la.

Kirk smiled, then they were on their way to the science lab, walking quickly, knowing McCoy was waiting.

"Spock, I can't just introduce another genome - I've got to have a body."

"What would you suggest, Doctor? Shall I incise your hand to test it?"

"Spock, I'm not in the mood right now. What are we going to do?"

Kirk sat in the corner, unnoticed, as Spock, McCoy and Peterson worked at their problem. Peterson was volunteering to have her finger cut to test the solution, and the other two were hashing out

the ramifications of using Human guinea pigs.

Kirk got up, having decided to leave them to their work, since he couldn't help anyway. He should never have come, but the thought of spending another night alone...

Suddenly a firebrand of pain sliced through his head, and things went grey for a moment. He still made his way towards the door, hoping they would not notice. He didn't want any more witnesses to whatever was happening to him.

Queen to queen's level three.

The dream words came fast and hard now, and Kirk, no longer able to contain himself, bolted for the door.

It is, in fact, exquisitely painful.

The door loomed before him. He hesitated, unsteady on his feet. It opened. He stumbled through somehow, his vision scored by red lines.

Starship Fleet Captain... you were the prototype, the model for the rest of us.

He turned down the corridor, placing one foot in front of the other, clutching the wall.

All I can say, Garth, if it happens to me it happens to you.

Kirk felt himself sliding down the wall, landing face-down on the floor. Faintly he heard footsteps coming from the lab, but they were drowned out by the dream words burning in his thoughts.

Captain Kirk, I presume?

Should I know you, sir?

No, Captain, no.

He drew a shuddering breath and felt cool fingers placed upon the psi centres on his face, then he knew only darkness.

"I'll get a stretcher!"

"There is no time, Doctor. His heart has stopped."

Spock released the mindmeld, Kirk's thoughts lost somewhere in fiery confusion and pain. He brought his fist down on his friend's sternum with measured force and administered age-old CPR, McCoy handling the air passage. Kirk did not respond.

Spock put controlled pressure on Kirk's chest again and again, his training prompting him to do the necessary thing to prolong a Human life. His own chest pained him physically, as if a great weight were there which could not be removed. The Captain, although obviously in crisis, had not called out to him - indeed, he had fled the room rather than reach out to the First Officer for help. Only the recently awakened link had alerted him to Kirk's distress, the powerful emanations reaching him as they sometimes did between Vulcans who had established mindlink with one another through close

friendships or family ties. Never before had he received such emanations from a non-telepathic Human. Perhaps the pressure in his own breast might suggest the communication was not of the mind at all, but of the heart...

The Vulcan, not prepared to examine this area at present, attempted to set it aside, but its demand on him increased, strengthened, with every downward thrust of his powerful arms.

As Peterson called for a paramed team, McCoy had a sense of *deja vu*. This was the second time this had happened to Kirk, except that Sulu had reported only respiratory arrest.

McCoy was having to deal with his own set of emotions even as Spock grappled with his. As the doctor leaned over his friend and breathed air into his lungs, he found himself willing life into the Captain's body, fussing at him for letting this happen, and condemning himself for being too busy to notice Kirk's deteriorating condition. But guilt was not going to help the Captain now. He dashed the new-formed tears from his eyes and continued to breathe, watching Kirk's chest rise and fall, rise and fall... Where was that blasted team?

They arrived quickly, bringing a portable cardiostimulator and the ever-useful cordrazine. McCoy applied the stimulator once, twice, with no response. Kirk's lips and fingernails were turning blue. McCoy popped a vial into the hypo and shot it home, with no effect. He cursed under his breath and stimulated the heart again. This time there was a faint beat, another, then another, and finally a regular rhythm.

Spock had ceased CPR when McCoy's equipment came, attempting to join minds again. First there was only darkness, then pain. As he fought to find Kirk he encountered the dreams, the shocking words from Elba II and also... Tantalus. Tantalus V Penal Colony.

Then he remembered his own conversations with Van Gelder. *Neural neutraliser... a device... bright death.* Kirk had been subjected to that other chair, too. *Loneliness... so lonely to be sitting there empty... such agony to be so empty.*

Something in Kirk responded to Spock's own memories. *Yes, I recognise it. It's used for rehabilitation purposes.*

Kirk was there, but terribly remote, even after his heart began beating again. Desperately Spock tried to bring him closer, but the Captain was focussed on that inexorable thing which served to bring him indescribable horror and pain - twice.

It is in fact exquisitely painful... the memory of the exquisite torment remains.

"Doctor, it is imperative that you perform the LEG on Jim immediately."

McCoy agreed and motioned for the anti-grav stretcher, but Spock picked Kirk up in his arms and carried him, like a sleeping child, all the way to sickbay.

Kirk woke gradually, the sedative leaving him in lighter and lighter dreams until they merged with reality and he found himself

in sickbay.

As he looked around he saw a nurse at her console, an orderly busy at some task, the usual monitoring equipment and, against the far wall, the LEG scanner. Somehow Kirk knew that Dr. McCoy had used it on him while he slept. He also knew what the doctor would have found, and what he would want to do...

Sweat beaded on his forehead, his hands became clammy as he envisioned yet another chair, still another forced entry into his mind. He tried to rise, but found himself bound by restraining belts. *Trapped! I've got to get out of here!*

"Nurse, please help me off this bed," he called, trying to control the panic in his voice.

Before she could reply McCoy came out of his office, hearing his Captain's voice, and motioned the nurse away. He looked at the life monitor and read the increased respiration, the surge of adrenaline, the hammering pulse. He readied a hypo sedative, holding it up to the light.

"What's that? Bones, don't knock me out. I don't want to sleep any more..."

The doctor placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and eased him back down. "Steady, Jim. I'm just going to calm you down a little. Can't risk another arrest." McCoy administered the hypo and watched with satisfaction as the readings stabilised.

Kirk sighed as the sedative relaxed him. "Bones, I'm not going to fall out of the bed. Are these straps necessary?"

"I didn't think you'd want to stick around once you knew I'd done the LEG. You knew what was wrong, didn't you?"

"Well, not with certainty until tonight, after I collapsed on the deck."

"Make that last night. You've been out 16 hours." McCoy's face screwed up with some emotion Kirk couldn't identify. It looked like guilt, sadness, anger, frustration - all wrapped up in one package. "Jim," he continued, "why didn't you tell me about the emotional episodes, the dreams?"

The myriad emotions McCoy was experiencing coalesced into a single feeling - hurt - and Kirk read it in his eyes.

"Bones, I'm sorry. I knew you and Spock would help me if you could, but something stopped me, as if I had no right... no right..." The Captain felt dangerously close to tears, and focused on something else. "How did you know about the dreams? I never told anyone..."

"Spock told me," the doctor said quietly, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Your heart stopped twice more after we got you back here. Spock mindmelded with you, trying to bring you out of whatever it was that had you in its grip. Finally he was able to reach you, but it was hard on him, Jim. He broke the insomnolent discipline to bring everything he had to bear on you. It almost killed him."

"Where is he now?" Kirk sat up again, worried.

"In his quarters. He'll sleep a while. I'm keeping an eye on him."

"And me?"

"Jim, it's my opinion that the neural neutraliser of Tantalus V caused considerable damage, some of which may have healed on its own. However, the sonic effects of Garth's chair pushed you over the edge. The LEG reveals extensive neural damage, some old and partially healed, some very recent. The impaired synapses cause mood changes as quickly as if someone had flipped a switch, and it's affected the involuntary systems - specifically the cardiopulmonary and motor systems." McCoy paused, considering his next words. "I'm not going to lie to you. You've got to get neural treatment, and you've got to have it now..."

"No choice?"

"No choice."

"Where?"

"We'll do it here, tonight, in private. Nurse Chapel, Spock and myself will be the only ones attending."

"All right, Doctor, only..." Kirk gripped McCoy's arm. "I want Uhura here tonight. She should... She knows, Bones. She deserves to be here too."

The doctor left to make arrangements, and the Captain began to count the minutes...

"Ready, Jim?"

"As I'll ever be. Bones?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Suppose I... What happens if I...?"

"Jim, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. It's my feeling the chair itself is what triggers the fear, at least in part. The device can be attached to a bed, or a wall for that matter. The chair was used on Tantalus and Elba because of the convenience of restraints. The people who were placed in them were not always willing subjects."

"I know, Doctor. I know."

A few minutes later Uhura, accompanied by Spock, was shown into the room by Chris Chapel, who then keyed the lock, sealing them in.

"Lieutenant, has Dr. McCoy explained everything to you?" asked the Captain.

"Yes, sir. I appreciate your asking me to come."

The Captain smiled, appreciating her in turn.

"Jim," said McCoy, in his 'I doctor - you patient' voice, "it's time." Seeing his friend stiffen involuntarily he added, "I've

attached the neural device to a monitoring couch, where you will be semi-reclining. You will not be under any restraint, and we'll be there during the entire procedure. You will never be alone," he said with emphasis.

"Well, then, let's do it."

Jim Kirk followed the doctor into the adjoining room, the others close behind. McCoy helped him onto the couch and made him comfortable. As the doctor activated the neural device Kirk instinctively cringed, fully expecting to feel the thoughts sucked from him, his own feelings twisted into agony.

Jim, remember where you are.

Kirk looked over to Spock, reassured, and lay back against the pillows.

"All right, Jim, you'll just feel yourself relaxing and drifting for a while, and when you wake up you won't remember any of the procedure - it'll be like taking a nap. Now, close your eyes."

Kirk drifted off into a hazy, humming warmth. He was, as the doctor had promised, totally unaware of the memories locked away suddenly restored by repaired neural synapses; of emotions triggered by such memories; of Spock melding with him to walk him through the most unpleasant, and share with him the most delightful; of Uhura holding his hand and once again wiping away the shed tears.

He was unaware of these things, but as the neural device finished synapse repair and he began to recognise those gathered around him, he was acutely convinced of this: it was hard to believe a man could die of loneliness - especially if that man had friends like these.

... there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.
Prov. 18:24

